

Town boards and local businesses gird for bike sharing

By Katy Ward

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PROVINCETOWN — A fairly new trend called “bike sharing,” which changes the way in that people rent and use bicycles, might make an appearance in town, and local bicycle shop owners are not too happy about it.

“We think this will be very damaging to our business,” Jeff Epstein, owner of Gale Force Bikes at 144 Bradford St. Extension, said. “This is an issue of local businesses versus large firms. ... There are five bike shops in town, and people are already complaining that there are too many bikes in town. Do we need 200, 300 more?”

A “bike share” is a rental operation that places bicycles throughout the community and allows them to be rented using a smartphone application. Rentals are typically for short periods of time — by the half hour or hour.

Rik Ahlberg, chair of the town’s bicycle committee, said that his board is in favor of this new concept, but thinks that regulations need to be put in place. He also said that Truro’s bicycle committee has asked to sign a contract with VBikes — one of the bike sharing companies that operates throughout the U.S., and is also eyeing Provincetown.

“Initially, we are going to see a lot of those bikes come into town [from Truro], and we need to come up with a way to address that,” Ahlberg said on Monday during a joint meeting with the select board. “We think a bike share is a great concept, but we’re not sure how to regulate and handle this going forward. ... I think there’s a way to regulate it and not have it take over our streets.”

There are two types of bike shares, according to a memo from Ahlberg. The first is more traditional: the operation is publicly subsidized by cities or corporate sponsors such as New Balance Hubway in Boston, Citibike in New York City,

and BikeTown in Portland, Ore. Such bike shares operate with fixed docks in limited locations and require users to return the rented bike to one of those docks. Users subscribe to annual or multi-day memberships, which generally cost around \$150 a year or \$20 a day, with unlimited trips between stations.

The second is a dockless bike share, in which there are no dedicated docks, and a public subsidy is not required. When the rental is over, bikes are left out in public at a destination for the next user to pick up.

Bill Meadows, owner of Ptown Bikes at 42 Bradford St., said he is worried about the influx of more bicycles and having them abandoned throughout town.

“Provincetown has gone from three bike shops to five,” Meadows said. “The number of rentals has saturated the town. We hear a lot of complaints that people can’t get down Commercial Street, and that the number of bikes is just too much. ... This is a convenient operation for people, but at a price to pay. You’re going to see bikes everywhere. When I was on the [bicycle] committee, we had a lot of complaints about abandoned bikes. Bikes in bushes, walkways, beaches. I think this will piggyback that. [I’m] wondering how safe this will be. What will Provincetown look like? What does it already look like? This really bothers me.”

Ahlberg doesn’t want to reject the concept of bike sharing out of hand.

“I’ve been in touch with the Cape Cod Commission, and they are very interested in trying to help with regulatory questions,” he said.

Bicycle committee member David Moorman said that bike shares are coming, regardless.

“This is an opportunity to work with [VBikes], since our local shops aren’t [going to],” Moorman said. “It seems like a mistake not to work with them and try to manage it, rather than just let it happen. ... There are plenty of manuals and guides on how to do it. I support our bike shops — they are great to us and great to the town — but I think it could be a partnership rather than a shift. I think we need to have a sense of control over it before it gets too crazy.”

The select board voted 4-1, with vice chair Erik Yingling opposed, to gather more information from town staff before moving forward.

“Is there a demand? There are already five bike shops in town,” select board member Louise Venden said. “Now you have me worried about people riding from Truro and sticking their bikes at the library and on Commercial Street, blocking sidewalks. ... [I] think it’s great [that] people are using bikes, and I’d like to make it easier and safer, and I’m supportive of the [bike committee], but I’m also supportive of the shop owners and pedestrians of this town.”

Select board member Tom Donegan said that he saw potential in the bike sharing concept.

“People are using bikes for transportation more so than ever before,” Donegan said. “I think, for me, [bike sharing] would be interesting, but I’m not sure about the dockless bike situation. ... I think a dock system in town, so people can ride from the East End to the West End, that’s an interesting idea. And maybe we could put out a [Request for Proposal] and local businesses could get involved.”