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Hubway's Green Incentive

Hubway's green incentive

by Alex Nguyen-Phuc

Anna Cook, 32, a purple-haired reference librarian at the Massachusetts Historical Society, walks to work with her wife, Hanna, every morning of the year, usually with a coffee stop on the way.

Before Cook signed up for a free trial Hubway bike-share pass in May, she rode the "T" home every afternoon and spent \$70 a month.

"It quickly became apparent that I could replace about 90 percent of my T trips with cycling," Cook said. "It was faster, door-to-door and combined exercise with the commute."

While many cyclists like Cook choose Hubway to add convenience to their daily commute, the program, surprisingly, offers no positive environmental impact to the city. Hubway officials said that cycling does not yet offset the fuel used by trucks to service the still-growing program.

Fixing "the worst of the worst"

Boston's Mayor Thomas Menino initiated the program to reduce obesity rates and increase the city's environmentalism, says Bike Program Director Nicole Freedman, a member of the 2000 Sydney Olympics cycling team. Bikers using the program have cycled more than 165,000 hours and offset 162 tons of carbon.

The average gas price in Boston in the first week of July was \$3.50

according to boston.com, while the average Hubway bike ride was 1.13 miles, according to the City of Boston's 2011 review of Boston Bikes. Using these numbers, the carbon calculator from the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority concluded that Bostonians save 20 cents on gas for every 1.13 miles cycled instead of driving a 20-mpg vehicle.

Before Menino's initiative, Boston was known as "a minefield for bicycle riders," according to the New York Times. Bicycling Magazine voted Boston one of the least cycling-friendly cities in the country three times between 1999 and 2006.

"We were the worst of the worst of the worst," Freedman said in reference to Boston's cobbled streets and lack of bike lanes.

In two years, Freedman put 72 Hubway stations in Boston and an additional 36 in Cambridge, Brookline and Somerville, according to the City of Boston.

A Hubway pass costs \$85 for a year of transportation, attracting users for its price and convenience. iPhone app developer, Anthony Roldan, 27, who bikes four times a week, got his Hubway membership as soon as it became available.

"You don't have to worry about locking up [your bike]," Roldan said, referring to the fact that Hubway bikes easily slip into a lock rack at the end of every trip.

However, Robin Maline, 18, a freshman at Coastal Carolina University and self-proclaimed "energy junkie," said Hubway reduces the carbon footprint of the city as well.

"There's so much construction and the city is so densely populated, walking around and the Hubway system reduce fossil fuels," Maline said.

Carbon footprint

According to the City of Boston website, Hubway users have saved 206.79 tons of carbon. But that number doesn't tell the whole story. Freedman says the environmental impact of re-installing the Hubway stations each spring cancels out any positive impact. "There are zero benefits to the environment," she said.

Looking forward

Nonetheless, Cook views Hubway as a means of diversifying her transit options. “I see supporting Hubway as one of a whole constellation of consumer choices to shift toward more environmental sustainability,” Cook said.

Freedman also said that the city will eventually be able to afford more efficient vehicles for installing and uninstalling Hubway stations to give Hubway a positive green impact.

“Hubway is only two years old,” Freedman said. “The gas burned on the vehicles will go down.”

Freedman plans to increase the number of stations to 200-to-250 in the next 5-to-10 years, and increase today’s 62 miles of bike lanes across the city to intensify Boston’s cyclist safety.

As one of 4,000 daily cyclists, Cook continues to face the dangers of Boston traffic, “going out of her way” to avoid busier routes. But her commute is reminiscent of her childhood biking days.

“I recall many Sunday morning rides in pursuit of Sunday brunch, which to a grumpy ten-year-old didn’t seem worth the effort,” Cook said. “But all that practice has certainly come in handy in my thirties.”