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From the Los Angeles Times

## Cities peddle parking for bicycles

Communities hope that valet and other services will encourage residents to use bikes for commuting and doing errands.

By Deborah Schoch  
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Pity the cyclist with the \$4,000 titanium road bike attempting to park at the Sunday farmers market in Santa Monica.

After 10:30 a.m., the meters and street signs were already claimed by early rising cyclists who chained their bike frames to the poles, and that hefty, pricey Kryptonite lock simply wouldn't fit around the nearest fence post.

Now, cyclists in search of heirloom tomatoes and organic cilantro can enjoy valet parking of the sort offered to BMW-driving diners at Ivy at the Shore or Chinois on Main, handing over their wheels to polite attendants who park them at a nearby bicycle stand.

In California bicycle circles, this kind of service is the coming thing.

Long Beach residents can check their bikes at the downtown Bikestation, where they can get free air for their tires and on-site repair service. A Santa Barbara self-service bike center opening May 1 will feature hot showers and a locker room for changing from sweaty nylon-spandex jerseys to suits, ties and heels.

Valet bike parking would seem a quintessentially Californian response to clogged freeways and overflowing parking lots. By encouraging more cyclists, cities are promoting environmental consciousness and outdoor cardio workouts.

Most important, for some cyclists, is knowing that someone is watching over their bike.

"You can have all the bike lanes you want, but when you get to your location, you need a place to park," said Russ Roca, 29, of Long Beach.

Roca, a freelance photographer, travels exclusively on a bike retrooled to carry 200 pounds of camera equipment. He is a regular at the local Bikestation, which, he says, has become a social spot for area cyclists.

These centers for cycling aficionados are largely public-private partnerships, modeled after facilities in Europe and Asia.

In 1996, the Bikestation in downtown Long Beach, near the MTA's Blue Line station, was the first to open in the United States. Its founders have created the Bikestation Coalition, an umbrella group that helps open other centers on the West Coast.

The concept has spread to the usual progressive hot spots: Berkeley, Palo Alto, San Francisco and Seattle.

Most of the centers offer valet and self-service parking. Some contain small repair shops, and some offer classes. They were built largely with public funds, and revenue covers most operating expenses.

The new Santa Barbara center, for example, is funded by downtown car parking fees. It contains \$80,000 in equipment and is expected to cost \$25,000 a year to operate.

Pasadena, meanwhile, is preparing plans for a bike center near the Gold Line light-rail stop in Old Town. The city hopes to use \$180,000 in state grant money to build a facility that will hold 40 bikes.

Santa Monica hopes to build a downtown bike center with room for 300 bikes. In the meantime, the city parks 200 to 250 bicycles at its crowded Sunday market and is bracing for up to 350 bikes this summer. The city funds the valet service.

Planners hope that these service-oriented parking centers will encourage residents to use their bikes to do errands and commute to work.

On Sunday on Santa Monica's Main Street, trusting shoppers were handing over their sleek racing bikes and rusty beach cruisers to attendants who by noon had filled spaces designed for seven cars with more than 70 bicycles. Although the service is free, most people left tips of \$1, \$3 and more.

Kristin Mongiello, 35, of Santa Monica sped up to the valet table, her bike pulling her son, Riley Egan, 5, who was behind her on an attached wheeled contraption called a "Trail-a-bike."

They were rushing to a super-hero themed birthday party, and Egan was dressed in a blue and gold hero costume. On the way, they needed a few things from the farmers market, where she has become a regular valet parker.

"Parking here is dreadful," Mongiello said, "and we've had two bikes stolen." She and others said they felt more secure using the free parking service launched by the city last year to ease parking congestion at the Sunday market.

Some owners initially were wary of leaving their bikes guarded by strangers.

"I actually came and scoped it out, looked at the people who were taking care of it," said Jason Puerto, 35, of Santa Monica. He felt so comfortable with the valet service that he left his \$1,700 Felt S22 with the attendants for the first time Sunday.

As often happens with good intentions, success has come with a cost. The Santa Monica project has cut severely into the income of a white-bearded man known only as Johnnie who started watching over bikes and dogs two years ago at the market's Main Street entrance.

"I'm the one who started this business. They come here and just put up their thing," said Johnnie, who said he once had as many as 40 cyclists as customers. On Sunday, he was guarding two bikes and four dogs and said he was falling behind on his rent. "But I'm not worried. God will bless me," he said.

These parking services are not simply for upscale cyclists, said Andréa White, executive director of the Bikestation organization, which now has centers in six different communities and is consulting with other cities, including Washington, D.C., where a bike center is due to open at Union Station next year.

Service workers and other low-income residents use the centers, and the Bikestation is starting an outreach program to teach cycling skills to women who have recently been released from prison or drug rehabilitation, she said. Those who complete the program will get bicycles to help them find jobs.

The Sunday crowd in Santa Monica, by contrast, was largely focused on finding basil and breakfast croissants.

Mary Ann Cummins, 70, has equipped her bicycle with side bags large enough to hold her artichokes, greens, broccoli and fresh Gaviota strawberries. "My God, I forgot my eggs," she said, and hastily returned her bike to an attendant.

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