

Business gets into biking
Some call phenomenon 'the new golf'

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Photo by Faith Ninivaggi

Leave your car at home, bike into work and get an annual \$700 raise. That's Millennium Pharmaceuticals Inc.'s proposition.

The Cambridge-based biotech offers employees who bike to work \$175 extra per pay quarter.

The 1,100-employee company supplies bike racks, locker rooms and showers at its headquarters near MIT.

"(The bike racks) are always full," says Millennium spokeswoman Jen Snyder.

In Massachusetts, the U.S. Census in 2000 found that only 0.52 percent of Bay Staters ages 16 and over commuted by bike. But a 2003 study by Portland State University found that 1.48 percent of Boston-area workers used a bicycle to get to work.

Biking enthusiasts say corporate moves such as Millennium's incentive program are part of a growing trend in Boston and the United States to make biking part of the business culture - and the movement goes beyond commuting.

"Biking is the new golf," said Andrew Prescott, owner of Urban AdvenTours LLC at 890 Commonwealth Ave., repeating a phrase biking enthusiasts like to use. "It's healthier and more engaging, more team-building."

Prescott, 31, said he just heard from a construction consulting firm that wanted to have a scavenger hunt using bikes. The hunt would take the crew throughout Boston, with the riders looking for clues.

Two other popular rides for corporate clients are the "Paul Revere Ride to Freedom" and the "Fun Way to Fenway."

Recently, SonicBids Inc. of Boston, a Web-based music promoter which helps bands find gigs, signed up with Urban AdvenTours for four Fridays in one month to allow its 45 employees a chance to cruise the city for more than four hours.

The tours aren't always pure leisure - some business bikers bring their Blackberrys, but Prescott said he discourages that.

gfgsubhBike commuting

"We're definitely seeing more interest in (bicycle) commuting," said David Watson, executive director of the Massachusetts Bicycle Coalition.

The activist organization often does presentations at businesses promoting a switch to bicycle commuting, said Watson.

Events and promotions also help, city officials said.

"We know for a fact that appropriate events and incentives we put together can increase ridership," said Nicole Freedman, Boston's bicycling planning director - otherwise known as Mayor Thomas Menino's "biking czar."

Menino wants to look in the direction of expanded cooperation with the private sector, Freedman said.

Freedman represented the U.S. team in the 2000 Sydney Olympics in the road race. And yes, she bikes to work.

Good for business

All of the buzz, both in the business community and at City Hall, over Menino's latest bicycle-oriented proposals has been good for bicycle salesmen, especially in the Boston metropolitan area.

Bicycle sales have increased 20 percent since 1997, according to the National Bicycle Dealers Association. In the Hub, the outlook has been better, in part because of the recent weather, industry officials say.

"This season has been pretty good for bicycling," says Jack Johnson, marketing director for Landry's Bicycles, which owns four stores in the Boston region.

Clint Paige, co-owner of Wheelworks of Belmont and Somerville, says his three stores, even his 20,000-square-foot Belmont anchor, are running low on space.

"We're fairly close to maxing out the real estate properties we inhabit," says Paige.

Paige says his 30-year-old business has already grossed 40 percent more from 2000 through 2007 than what it grossed in the 1990s.

Driving some of the sales could be a willingness on the part of businesses to accommodate bikers. Racks are popping up at places of work, Paige said.

"They're more willing to create the necessary space," said Paige.

Another part of the bicycling pitch is an appeal to get workers in shape.

Watson says there is a bottom line aspect businesses are interested in: healthier employees who are not driving up insurance rates.

"We're hearing a little bit of that," said Prescott.

But Prescott said the whole hobby of biking is attractive for many reasons, from commuting speeds to the addictive nature of the hobby.

“We will see more people commuting when they see the reasons beyond health, beyond the fact that it’s faster.”

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