

# Book-a-Bike: Increasing Access to Physical Activity with a Library Card

*James Hill*

## INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2012 our library system had been struggling to implement a wellness plan for the staff, a challenge for seven far-flung branches with anywhere from 1 to 15 employees. The administrative team started brainstorming ideas about what we could do as a library system to reach our staff in even the smallest villages. The director said, "Bikes!" Bikes. Bicycles. Why not? And why keep them just for the staff? Why not let patrons borrow them?

A quick Internet search did not turn up any results of other public libraries checking out bicycles. As a library system, Athens County Public Libraries (ACPL) has a reputation for firsts. We were the first public library system in the United States to switch to an open-source Integrated Library System (Koha) (Breeding, 2002) and we were the first public library system to host free summer lunches (Watkins, 2002). Bicycles could be another first.

We studied bike rentals and sharing programs that we could find information about, like CitiBike kiosk system in New York. The librarian mind starts racing: How does one check out a bicycle? What about storage, helmets, repair, and upkeep? How long is the loan period? Do you need a deposit? Fees, liability, safety, age limits, training? We knew we had a lot to figure out.

Athens County is a mix of rural and small cities in the Appalachian foothills of southeastern Ohio with a population of about 65,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). ACPL has seven buildings throughout the county. Of our seven libraries, three branches are located within close proximity to the Hocking River and Adena Bikeway, a paved trail of over 22 miles that follows the Hocking River and traverses wonderful landscapes of woods and open areas, including parts of the campus of Ohio University, a historic mining town called Eclipse, past canal ruins, through the Wayne National Forest, and across Hocking College in Nelsonville, Ohio (Athens County Visitors Bureau, 2015). A bike-lending program that took advantage of that resource was a natural fit for the libraries.

## **COMMUNITY INPUT**

Because this was going to be a truly new program, however, we wanted to judge the interest and practicality of such an effort. We decided to call a community meeting of anyone and everyone we thought might have insight, advice, and warnings. Thanks to a new local nonprofit, Live Healthy Appalachia, and the ongoing efforts of the city/county health department, Athens County was recently abuzz with information and programs about health, wellness, and exercise. The library wanted to capitalize on that momentum and contribute our part.

We sent 32 invitations to our local hospitals, bike shops, schools, police departments, city officials, the health department, and other nonprofits. At our first meeting in November 2012, we had about 20 attendees, including a school nurse, a city council member, the county and city planners, the director of the Convention and Visitor's Bureau, the city's DARE officer, the health department's education director, and a handful of representatives from other businesses and nonprofits.

Even if the library decided not to pursue bicycles, the meeting brought together the right people and advanced the conversation about bikes and safety and the desire to get our community outside more. We discussed the need for a bike-lending program and what types of bicycles and other equipment might be included. Potential funding sources were considered. Could the program run on donations? The county's and city's planners both pointed out that it dovetailed perfectly with their respective long-range comprehensive plans of improving alternative transportation access and increasing access to resources such as the paved bike path, rural parks, and preserves.

The school nurse discussed the obesity problem in the local district and was a great help alleviating concerns about lice in helmets. As a parasite, lice need a host to survive. The nurse recommended simply placing helmets in rotation. If left unused for 24 hours, any parasites should die; a visual inspection inside the helmet after the dormant period would suffice.

A local bike cooperative, ShadeTree Bike Works, also detailed their past problems with attempts at a bike share program in town and shared lessons learned from their efforts. ShadeTree Bike Works' approach was to repair donated bicycles, paint them yellow, and leave them around high-traffic areas for people to use. If you saw a yellow bike uptown, for example, you were welcome to take it

## **Book-a-Bike 45**

to use, then simply leave it in a visible place for the next person. In a college town, however, where bicycles are often rounded up en masse by fencers, most of the bikes quickly disappeared. The quality of donated equipment was also a barrier. With different brands and types of bicycles, constant maintenance was needed.

Buoyed by the positive energy of the meeting, the library started research in earnest. What other bike-loaning models are out there outside of libraries? Do these models charge, and how can we offer ours for free? What is the liability if someone wrecks and is injured? Is there an age limit? What about children's bicycles? How many different sizes of bikes do we need? Where do we keep the bicycles? And how do you catalog a bicycle?

The two most common models we found were the kiosk systems used in larger cities and rental programs usually offered by a bike store or, in some cases, by a local business like a winery trying to promote tourism.

The kiosk systems were too complicated and expensive for our purposes. Our capital city, Columbus, had just announced its kiosk system called CoGo starting up summer 2014 (CoGo Bike Share, 2016). Along with the ability to use credit cards to unlock bikes, they have built-in computers to monitor usage, GPS navigators, and various other antitheft devices. We simply wanted to make bicycles available to our patrons as easily and cheaply as possible.

One of the local bicycle shops had offered rental equipment for a short time, but abandoned this program after it found the bikes coming back damaged and dirty. The shop was renting mountain bikes, and the temptation for inexperienced riders to try to do more than they were capable was too great, apparently. Because of the shop's experience, we decided to use a heavier cruiser bike that cannot be easily taken off road.

In that first community meeting, it was suggested that we conduct an online survey on our website to gauge public interest. We asked questions about current bike usage habits, roadway availability, and respondents' perception of safety. We wanted to know how far people typically rode and their destination or reason for riding. Most respondents reported an average ride of 20 to 40 minutes, traveling 5 to 10 miles at a time. They ran errands, visited friends, went to work or school, took picnics, or visited the library. The majority thought the idea of borrowing a bike was appealing and agreed that they or someone they knew would check one out if available.

The survey also helped us hone in on what was needed. We found that most children had a bicycle, but not the parents. If they were transporting bikes to use the paved path, they only had room for the smaller kids' bikes. Having adult bikes available would mean that families could more easily ride together. For that reason, we opted for adult-size bicycles only.

## **FUNDING**

Because Athens County consistently ranks as one of the poorest counties in Ohio (Frohlich, 2015), ACPL does not charge late fines. We do not want a few dollars to be a barrier to the valuable services we provide. In keeping with that philosophy, we knew this new program had to be free. As a library system, we were willing to absorb the risks of theft and maintenance if it meant making

bicycles available to more people. We settled on a program that simply required a valid library card and a "hold harmless" waiver for all users.

Initially, we thought this program might be eligible for a grant from the State Library utilizing Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funds, but unfortunately, due to a government funding impasse that year, those monies would not be available (Millane, 2013). We researched a few other ideas, but finally found a potential funder closer to home. The O'Brien Foundation funds programs nationally, but also focuses on regional projects, and prefers to fund start-up programs focused on health and disabilities. It has no budgeting or matching fund requirements and a simple application process. It was a perfect fit. The application deadline, however, was quickly approaching.

## **EQUIPMENT AND BUDGET**

In early January 2013, we held another community meeting with the same stakeholders as the first meeting. We shared our research and outlined the direction we were thinking of heading with the Book-a-Bike program.

We asked ShadeTree Bike Works and a local bike shop to help us put together an equipment list and budget for the grant proposal. We have three bike shops in the area, but only one, Athens Bicycle, attended our meetings, so ultimately it received our business. This has become a continuing partnership, and we relied on their expertise heavily as we evaluated a variety of bicycles. We settled on a three-speed internal hub commuter bike. It has the benefits of being low-maintenance with no derailleur or rear brake pads to maintain. We chose two frame sizes, a 15- and a 19-inch. With a quick-release adjustable seat, it is comfortable for most people and not a bike currently sold in Athens. If you see a black Trek Cocoa, you know it is a library bike! Additionally, it is a heavy, low bicycle. Three speeds are enough for the relatively flat bike path, and there is very little concern of it being used as an off-road bike. Even the most expert riders will have a hard time bunny-hopping these bikes.

We also wanted trailers that could double as strollers and tagalongs for younger patrons. A tagalong turns a regular adult bicycle into a tandem; the adult rides the regular bike while a child rides a smaller attached bike. It is a fun way for kids learning to ride to feel like they are on a bigger bike.

We also priced out a few specialty bikes to round out the program. Because of the O'Bleness Foundation's interest in disabilities and adaptive equipment, we requested a hand trike, a three-wheeler that operates with a rowing motion and only requires use of the upper body. We also added a regular adult-sized trike that has a hauling platform on the back. Our Nelsonville Public Library is located near the food pantry, and on distribution days, it is not unusual to see the yellow cargo bike being used to carry a box of canned goods home.

Additionally, we asked for a heavy-duty three-wheeled recumbent for those patrons who maybe had not ridden a bike for a while or who might have balance issues. It continues to be one of the most popular items simply because it is so much fun to ride. The total requested budget for 21 bicycles was \$11,709.84. Athens Bicycle agreed to purchase the bikes for us at wholesale cost and assemble them for free.

## **Book-a-Bike 47**

After much thought, we decided to keep all of the equipment on the floor inside the three library branches that would have Book-a-Bike. We considered the possibility of outside storage but were concerned about theft and weather. We also considered adding small storage-type sheds near the library, but decided it would ask too much of the staff to leave the building to facilitate a bicycle transaction. By keeping the bikes inside, we could protect them and stay near the circulation desk for the checkout process.

In our grant, we asked for carpet protection for the area we planned to use as an equipment-holding location. Large plastic floor mats (like those used at a desk to make rolling chairs move more easily) were perfect. We found an online distributor for helmets and bike safety flags. We priced bells, baskets, and locks through the bike shop, again at wholesale. Our budget request for miscellaneous equipment was \$4,444.45. Additionally, ShadeTree Bike Works provided a list of common tools needed for basic repairs and upkeep. From wrenches to bike stands, we compiled a comprehensive list. The total cost of tools for three buildings was \$1,162.00. We did not request monies for staffing or salaries. Our total estimate for bicycles, equipment, and tools to be included in the grant request came to \$17,316.29.

## **GRANT WRITING**

One of the first questions asked at the community meetings was, "What is the libraries' potential liability if someone is injured while riding a library bike?" Anticipating that question from the foundation, too, we talked to our insurance company about the risks. Although we are not a municipal library, our property insurance is considered a municipal plan, similar to those cities carry. When our broker contacted the insurance underwriter, the company quickly dismissed our concerns. As bike kiosk systems have become ubiquitous across the country, the big questions and issues have been solved. As long as we had a standard "hold harmless" clause on file for each user, the library assumed no additional responsibility. The insurance company did request that we make helmets available, which was already planned. As a result, the Book-a-Bike program did not increase ACPL's overall liability premium, though we did add additional rider coverage for the replacement cost of the fleet. So, if a bicycle was stolen, we could submit a claim. That annual premium increase was less than \$100.

Writing the actual grant application gave us the opportunity to flesh out how the program would function. With input from our board of trustees, we drafted the necessary policies and procedures. Users would need to have a valid library card, have the necessary paperwork on file—including the lending agreement, parental permission, and the hold harmless consent (see Appendix B and C). ACPL's general circulation policy applied: there would be no fines or late fees for using Book-a-Bike; however, bikes and equipment not returned by the agreed-upon time would be treated as theft. Locks would be provided by request.

To highlight the community interest in our proposal, we gathered letters of support from those who attended our planning meetings. Our grant application included six letters from various agencies and organizations. We also

#### **48 Audio Recorders to Zucchini Seeds**

included a letter from our insurance broker alleviating any concerns about the institution's liability and policy protections we would put in place.

We submitted our grant application on February 15, 2013. In March, we were notified that the project was funded in its entirety. On April 4, we called a final community meeting and announced the award. The Athens city planner commented that over the years he had attended several meetings to discuss bike lending. No one, until now, had successfully pulled it off. From start to finish, Book-a-Bike took about six months to put in place.

We had our official rollout on May 5, 2013, with test rides, a safety town (an area for safety demonstrations), a Maypole dance, music, and refreshments. We sent a press release announcing the program and created fliers inviting the community to come and inspect the fleet. The local bike club donated kids' helmets left over from an event, which we were able to give away for free. It was a big party that resulted in a lot of media attention, including the local newspapers and an NPR affiliate.



## THE MANAGEMENT DETAILS

All of the Book-a-Bike equipment is bar-coded and cataloged (helmets, locks, lights, bikes, even tools). A quick search of our Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) will pull up the entire collection. The catalogers used standard Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR2) language to design the original Machine-Readable Cataloging (MARC) record. For added equipment, they simply revise the necessary fields. Most importantly, we just needed a way to check out the various equipment so we knew who the responsible party is. Each piece is scanned to the patron's record just like a book or a video.

For the first few months, we asked users to fill out an evaluation form so we would have some ideas for improvements to the process. Almost immediately, we extended the checkout period from two hours to three, we relaxed the requirement for a parent to be present for those under age 13 in favor of letting any responsible adult assume the liability (that is, grandparents and older siblings), and we loosened the tedious inspections of the bikes.

At the start of the program, the bike shop owner presented a mini-workshop to the staff about what to look for when inspecting the bikes for safety and what could be catastrophic to a rider. Initially, we were checking the bikes thoroughly before each checkout. Each piece of equipment has a folder with an ongoing inspection checklist; ideally, if a bike comes back with a scratched fender, the damage is noted and kept with the bicycle so the next user is not blamed. That process, however, was taking too long, especially on busy days. Now, staff gives the bike a cursory once-over (air pressure, brakes, handlebars, bell), but assumes everything else is functional until we hear otherwise from a user (see Appendix D). We ask everyone upon return if they had a good trip and if everything worked as expected.

Because our bikeway is paved, we have very little issue with mud. We keep a rag nearby to wipe off any rain. We store our helmets in bins under the front desk and rotate them out after each use. As suggested by the school nurse, they sit for 24 hours before being reused. We also keep the other add-ons (lights,

baskets, locks) at the front desk, but only check those out when asked. In keeping with the insurance company's request, we require everyone to check out (or have) a helmet. We cannot make adults wear them, but we do require anyone under the age of 18 to have the helmet on when they leave the building.

After our first summer, we purchased headlights and taillights. We thought the bikes might be mothballed for the colder months, but even during the long winter, our patrons want to get outside many days. Because it gets dark so early during those months, we wanted to be able to allow equipment to continue to go out and meet Ohio state law: cyclists must use front and rear lights a half hour before sunrise and a half hour before sunset.

After three years, aside from a few new tires and tubes and brake adjustments, we are still using our original fleet. Quality goes a long way. We still keep the bicycles on the floor at all three libraries. They are visible from the front desk and serve as conversation starters for new patrons and visitors: "I can check out a bike?!"

There have been incidents. We have not had any thefts, although we have had late returns and warnings. The front desk staff have barred a handful of patrons from borrowing due to consistent lateness. One bike was destroyed when struck by a car, but the patron was uninjured. Another time, a patron rode a cargo bike into the river; again, no injuries. Mostly, the incidents have led to funny stories.

## IMPACT BEYOND THE LIBRARY

Since its inception, Book-a-Bike has continued to be a popular service and has been the model for other libraries. At least once a month, a library calls to ask how we did it. I share our story and even send them all of our collateral via a shared file in Google Drive. I have talked to libraries and consortia from Kansas to Florida, and closer to home. Based on our success, Meigs County Library, an adjoining county to our south, partnered with its health department to make bicycles available for free (Meigs County District Public Library, 2016). It even (with our permission, of course) used the name. Its health department used grant funds to pay for the bicycles, and the library makes them available with a library card. Like Athens, Meigs County has a paved path near the library. They were even able to use the same bike shop for their equipment.

In Stark County, Ohio, which has a much larger population than Athens, the library system partnered with a kiosk company to make bicycles available at six of its buildings (Stark Library, 2015). With BikeSmart, bicycles can be borrowed for a fee with a credit card, or for free with a valid library card using a mobile phone app, Zagster. In each case, the library is looking at what works best for its community and its budget.

In the summer of 2015, the city of Athens was designated a bronze-level Bicycle Friendly Community by the League of American Bicyclists. Book-a-Bike and the availability of free bikes helped make that possible. The designation makes Athens even more well known across the country and further distinguishes our community as a great place to visit and live. Book-a-Bike has been well received in the communities and is often asked about at community events

## 50 Audio Recorders to Zucchini Seeds

and festivals. Our patrons have come to expect innovation from the Athens County Public Libraries.

## REFERENCES

- Athens County Visitors Bureau. (2015). Hockhocking Adena Bikeway. Retrieved from [athensohio.com/wheretoplay/hockhocking-adena-bikeway-2](http://athensohio.com/wheretoplay/hockhocking-adena-bikeway-2).
- Breeding, M. (2002). An update on open source ILS. *Information Today*, 19(9). Retrieved from [www.infotoday.com/it/oct02/breeding.htm](http://www.infotoday.com/it/oct02/breeding.htm).
- CoGo Bike Share. (2016). Retrieved from [www.cogobikeshare.com](http://www.cogobikeshare.com).
- Frohlich, T. C. (2015, Jan. 10). The poorest county in each state. Retrieved from [www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2015/01/10/247-wall-st-poorest-county-each-state/21388095](http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2015/01/10/247-wall-st-poorest-county-each-state/21388095).
- Meigs County District Public Library. (2016). Book a Bike. Retrieved from [meigs.lib.oh.us/node/639](http://meigs.lib.oh.us/node/639).

## REFERENCES

- Athens County Visitors Bureau. (2015). Hockhocking Adena Bikeway. Retrieved from [athensohio.com/wheretoplay/hockhocking-adena-bikeway-2](http://athensohio.com/wheretoplay/hockhocking-adena-bikeway-2).
- Breeding, M. (2002). An update on open source ILS. *Information Today*, 19(9). Retrieved from [www.infotoday.com/it/oct02/breeding.htm](http://www.infotoday.com/it/oct02/breeding.htm).
- CoGo Bike Share. (2016). Retrieved from [www.cogobikeshare.com](http://www.cogobikeshare.com).
- Frohlich, T. C. (2015, Jan. 10). The poorest county in each state. Retrieved from [www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2015/01/10/247-wall-st-poorest-county-each-state/21388095](http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2015/01/10/247-wall-st-poorest-county-each-state/21388095).
- Meigs County District Public Library. (2016). Book a Bike. Retrieved from [meigs.lib.oh.us/node/639](http://meigs.lib.oh.us/node/639).
- Millane, E. M. (2013). *LSC Redbook: Analysis of the Executive budget proposal*. Retrieved from Ohio Legislative Service Commission at [www.lsc.ohio.gov/fiscal/redbooks130/lib.pdf](http://www.lsc.ohio.gov/fiscal/redbooks130/lib.pdf).
- Stark Library to loan bikes at six locations. (2015, June 5). Retrieved from [www.cantonrep.com/article/20150605/news/150609602](http://www.cantonrep.com/article/20150605/news/150609602).
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2016). QuickFacts: Athens County, Ohio. Retrieved from [www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/39009](http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/39009).
- Watkins, C. (2002). Free lunch now feeds the minds of future readers. *American Libraries*, 33(4), 15. Retrieved from [www.questia.com/read/1G1-84722546/free-lunch-now-feeds-the-minds-of-future-readers](http://www.questia.com/read/1G1-84722546/free-lunch-now-feeds-the-minds-of-future-readers).

# APPENDIX C: BOOK-A-BIKE PARENTAL OR LEGAL GUARDIAN CONSENT

last name:

card #



Athens County Public Libraries

## BOOK-A-BIKE PARENTAL OR LEGAL GUARDIAN CONSENT

In consideration of my guardian's borrowing of a bicycle or riding in or on bicycle equipment from Athens County Public Libraries, the undersigned agrees as follows:

1. I am the parent or legal guardian of \_\_\_\_\_.  
I understand that my child/guardian's participation in this activity may include risks and hazards. I am aware of the risks and hazards inherent in my guardian's participation, and recognizing those risks and hazards, I hereby give my consent and approval to my child/guardian's participation.
2. On behalf of my child/guardian and myself, I hereby release ACPL and its employees, volunteers, and agents from any and all liability for any and all claims and causes of action that I or my child/guardian may hereafter have on account of any and all injuries and/or damage that I or my child/guardian may sustain, or any loss of any other sort, arising out of the negligence of ACPL or any other person. In addition, on behalf of my child/guardian and myself, I covenant and agree not to sue ACPL and agree to forever hold them harmless from any liability, claims, demands, actions, or causes of action whatsoever arising from my child/guardian's or my participation in Book-a-Bike, whether such liability, claims, demands, or actions are the result of the negligence of ACPL or any other person. This release of liability, covenant not to sue, and hold-harmless agreement shall be binding upon me, my child/guardian, my heirs, and/or my child's heirs, executors, administrators, personal representatives, and assigns, and shall inure to the benefit of ACPL and their assigns.
3. I hereby agree to indemnify ACPL and to assume and be responsible for all harm, injury, or damage caused by me or my child/guardian to ACPL, ACPL property or equipment, other person, or personal property used in conjunction with this activity.

Parent or Legal Guardian's Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ My child/guardian has permission to ride bicycles with a caregiver other than myself.



Last name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Bike number: \_\_\_\_\_ Helmet number: \_\_\_\_\_ Lock number: \_\_\_\_\_

**Book-a-Bike Safety Inspection Checklist****HANDLEBARS**

Left Right

NO NO

loose\* ☐ ☐grips missing, loose,  
or torn ☐ ☐bell loose or damaged ☐

NOTES—

**BRAKES**

Front Rear

YES YES

levers move easily\* ☐ ☐calipers spaced evenly\* ☐ ☐pads intact ☐ ☐bike stops\* ☐ ☐**REFLECTORS**

Front Rear

NO NO

damaged/loose ☐ ☐missing ☐ ☐**TIRES & WHEELS**

Front Rear

NO NO

needs inflated ☐ ☐excessive tread wear ☐ ☐loose/broken spokes\* ☐ ☐**SADDLE & FLAG**correct height ☐

(demonstrate)

seat cover intact ☐flag intact ☐**FORKS & FRAME**bent or cracked\* ☐**CHAIN & GEARS**visible damage/rust ☐chain too loose ☐shifting mechanisms ☐

dirty or damaged

\* indicates the bike is unsafe and should not  
be circulated**PASS/FAIL**appears sound ☐ ☐

YES NO

Inspector \_\_\_\_\_

**HELMET & LOCK**

YES

correct fit ☐operates smoothly ☐

Time checked out: \_\_\_\_\_ Staff: \_\_\_\_\_

Time returned: \_\_\_\_\_ Staff: \_\_\_\_\_