

EL CERRITO BART PEDALS AHEAD

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In 1998, Stephen Grover saw an opportunity to change the way people think about how they store their bicycles at BART stations.

It hasn't happened yet, but at the El Cerrito Plaza BART station, there's been a step in that direction.

Forty-eight new bike lockers have opened at the El Cerrito Plaza BART station, available whenever people want to use them.

Grover and El Cerrito officials say that's a change from how bicycles are normally stored. Older bike lockers at BART stations are rented for a year. Those lockers have waiting lists and they're empty most of the time.

"One person gets them - they're usually very cheap to rent - and you get it, and some people may only use it a couple times a year," Grover said. "Some people may use it every single day. But on average, the best we've seen is 20 percent, one in five lockers having a bike in it."

The new "eLockers," which opened about three weeks ago, are located on the northeast corner of the El Cerrito Plaza BART station, next to the Ohlone Greenway. A roof with a "wave" design is above them.

"I think they're really attractive and the (bicyclists) I've talked to are very excited to have them," said Mayor Letitia Moore.

The city hired Grover in 1998 to design a new facility to store bicycles. He started a new company, eLock Technologies LLC, to design a facility that could be more secure and be used on demand.

The lockers have been six years in the making. They cost \$304,000, funded by grants and Measure C tax money.

The city broke ground on the construction in 2002. Grover said delays came in part from tweaking the new technology.

The lockers use an ATM-like electronic "BikeLink" key card that can be bought for \$20. The storage cost is 25 cents for four hours.

Fifteen people have bought the keys so far. Grover said he was hoping for 30 to start and the number eventually to grow to 250 users.

"We're not seeing a lot of users because we haven't been trying to attract them," he said. "We have a handful of users, and that's all we need to do an effective pilot."

The lockers were funded by grants from Caltrans, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and the West Contra Costa Transportation Advisory Committee. In addition, the city spent \$63,000 awarded from the Bay Area Measure C transportation sales tax.

The lockers are just one part of an effort to make the city more convenient for people walking or taking public transportation.

A couple of blocks south from the lockers, Fairmount Avenue, from Richmond Street to San Pablo Avenue, is undergoing a makeover to make the area more pedestrian-friendly.

The city is holding meetings this summer to help develop a more detailed circulation plan for transportation modes other than vehicular.

The bike lockers have prompted Albany resident David Farrell to bike to the BART station rather than drive. But he said he had problems the first time he tried using a locker. Frustrated, he had to bike back home after he tried entering his BikeLink card and couldn't get it to work. He said he didn't understand the message on the LCD screen and didn't realize the card was supposed to be entered only halfway. His questions to the city were transferred to Grover, who Farrell said was very responsive and helped him understand how to use the machine. Farrell, the acting university archivist at UC Berkeley and Albany School Board president, has since become a fan. He said he liked the locker's design, security and how cheap it was 50 cents for eight hours.

"It's 50 cents to park, and it's healthy - not using any gas, very convenient, closer than the parking lot, right next to the entrance," he said. "I think it's wonderful. I hope it works and they're able to extend it."

Caption:

Covered bicycle lockers have been installed at the El Cerrito Plaza BART station, where one in five of the old lockers, which had to be rented by the year, stood empty every day. The new lockers are available daily for bicyclists at a rate of 25 cents for four hours. (Mark DuFrene/Times)

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