

DESIGNER PROMOTES BIKE LOCKERS

by ALAN LOPEZ, Staff Writer

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Steven Grover inserted a credit-cardlike key into an electronic bike locker at the El Cerrito Plaza BART station.

He then rolled his 15-speed bicycle inside and shut the metal mesh door after pressing a button indicating the amount of time he wanted the bicycle in storage.

Grover, who designed the lockers, would like more people to use them. He will join the city and regional transportation agencies in a promotional event on Bike to Work Day from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. on Thursday.

After that, look for a banner and brochures advertising the facility at the BART station, said Linda Young, a transportation specialist with the West Contra Costa Transportation Advisory Committee.

"We'd really like to call people's attention to it," said Young.

So far, about 50 people have purchased the \$20 BikeLink cards, said Grover. Storage in one of the 48 electronic lockers costs 5 cents an hour.

El Cerrito resident Alec Bauer said the lockers have encouraged him to bike to BART three or four times a week.

"I think they're also a good civic addition to the city of El Cerrito," said Bauer, a 31-year-old chef, and one of several people who raved about the facility. "It makes me proud to ride my bike down and use these things. Anything that makes using mass transit easier and more convenient and/or cheaper, the better, as far as I'm concerned."

They also fit in with the city's effort to create a more pedestrian- and bike-friendly area around the Plaza BART station, said El Cerrito environmental analyst Melanie Mintz. The facility sits along the Ohlone Greenway trail, just two blocks away from the El Cerrito Plaza shopping center.

A distinctive metal wave-shaped roof give the lockers and the area a recognizable identity, Mintz said.

Sporting a pony tail and a beard, Grover, a 44-year-old architect and civil engineer, develops pedestrian and bike access facilities for a living. That includes a Berkeley bike bridge over Interstate 80 at University Avenue .

He started a new Berkeley company eLock Technologies LLC after the city recruited him to design the lockers five years ago.

The city spent about \$63,000 on the \$397,000 project. Federal, state and county grants paid for the rest, Mintz said.

The City Council debated whether the project was worth the money. Some residents remain skeptical.

Resident Peter Loubal said he believed the lockers cost around \$500,000 after city staff time is taken into account. And he's only seen up to five bicycles in storage at a time.

"The issue to me is the most bang for the buck we can get," said Loubal, adding that a similar non-electronic bike locker concept has existed in Europe for decades. "One can park bicycles safely, much more cheaply."

Grover, Mintz and others say the eLockers are a great improvement over BART's standard bike lockers, where individuals rent out the lockers for months at a time. eLockers on the other hand, are open to anyone with a smart card.

Grover said he wanted to limit the number of people using the new lockers while he worked the kinks out.

"If we see 150 cards being regularly used on 48 lockers," said Grover, "I would say that would be a strong measure of success."

That push to increase usage will begin in earnest on Bike to Work Day, when people can pick up free BikeLink cards in exchange for completing a survey, said Mintz.

Meanwhile, Grover said Palo Alto and Santa Cruz have installed a total of five electronic bike locker facilities. Oakland will install two near the 12th and 19th Street BART stations.

BART is also planning to install electronic bike lockers at the Dublin, Pleasanton, San Leandro and North Berkeley stations, said Carter Mau, a manager of customer access for BART.

BART is also applying for grant funding to bring the lockers to additional stations, he said, though it may not necessarily incorporate Grover's work.

"One of the problems we have is we don't have enough bike storage at stations," said Mau. "So we feel bike lockers are a good way to encourage people to get to our station by means other than the automobile."

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