# Citibike’s Success in Low-Income Areas Indicates Bright Expansion Possibilities

6//15/2015

By Alexander Spangher

At the corner of Broome and Norfolk streets on the Lower East Side, where public housing projects line the street, the Citi Bike rack was empty.

A couple blocks away, at Grand and Clinton streets, the blue racks were also empty, as were others in the neighborhood. “The stations are always empty,” said Bruce Longley, who was dropping off his rental at the rack on Grand Street.

When the Citi Bike bike-share program debuted in 2013, it’s first stations were placed across midtown, southern Manhattan and western Brooklyn — neighborhoods that, in many cases, had average incomes more than twice the average income of the city, according to 2010 census data. It was uncertain whether the program would be successful expanding in lower-income areas.

The Lower East side, the lowest-income part of the original expansion, in fact, is the highest-use area of the program, according to an analysis of millions of individual Citi Bike records collected between 2015. High participation rates might foreshadow success as the program expands into Harlem, Queens and deeper into Brooklyn.

“Ensuring access for lower-income residents is a challenge that all American bike share systems have had to address,” states a planning report by the New York City Bike Share, the company operating Citi Bike.

The bikes are essential to Longley's daily routine. He is 52 years old and currently unemployed, but finds odd jobs helping friends with housework and computer issues He lives by the Clinton Street station, and uses the bikes not only for short trips and errands, but also for interviews and exercise.

And he’s not alone. In the morning, bikes are checked out in the Lower East Side at higher rates than anywhere else and in the evening, they’re checked right back in at the same high rates.

Part of Citi Bike’s success among lower-income residents is due to its discount program. “NYCHA (NYC Housing Authority) residents and CDCU (Community Development Credit Union) members enter a code to get the discount,” said Dani Simons of NYC Bike Share. At $60 for discounted annual memberships, this makes Citi Bike an inexpensive transportation option for lower-income New Yorkers.

For Longley, who is part of a credit union but not one participating the discount program, this was a revelation. “I’m going to look into it,” he said.

Access to participating credit unions is essential, as many lower-income residents do not otherwise have a credit card or a debit card to register for the bike share. Kenny Perez, from Lower East Side People’s Federal Credit Union, said that all who live, work or worship in the area and make less than $38,000 a year are eligible, and that signing up is a straightforward 30-minute process. “They walk in and they’re done,” he said.

High participation occurs despite the fact that the first stations were not always located conveniently for NYCHA residents. “Right now there is really very little overlap between stations and public housing,” says Julia Kite from Transportation Alternatives, a biker advocacy group, “and it doesn’t make a whole lot of sense if the bike stations aren’t where you live or where you need to go.” Placing more stations by city housing projects, she says, will bring even more low-income residents into the system.

One concern that could affect participation after expansion is biker safety. More pedestrian accidents outside Manhattan occur in lower-income neighborhoods than higher income, according to data released as part Mayor Bill De Blasio’s Pedestrian Safety Action plan.

Kite says safety will increase with more bikers on the road, as bikers and bike lanes force drivers to be more conscientious. “The more people you get out there cycling, the safer it is for everyone.

Mason Silber, a 24-year-old biker living on Ridge and Houston Streets on the Lower East Side, has noticed this effect. “Often bike lane gets blocked and I have to ride in the street, but there are usually other bikers. The more bikers, the safer it is.”

Citi Bike, too, has a good track record with safety. Since its inception in May 2013, there has not been a single Citi Bike-related fatality, says Kite, whose group tracks Department of Transportation and New York Police Department crash data, as well as media reports.

For Mr. Longley, safety is not a concern, and he plans to continue riding often, and wherever the program expands. And, as helpful as Citi Bike has been for his life, he might need it for more than just it’s practicality. “I have a midlife crisis, but I don’t deal with it by doing drugs or have unprotected sex. I just ride without a helmet.”