Summer Semester Summary: BroncoBikes

At the end of the winter 2014 semester Dr. Harold Glasser offered me an intern position to continue with my bicycle rental research that I conducted and presented in his ENVS 4100 class, with an end goal of implementing a bike rental pilot at WMU for the fall 2014 semester. Other than briefly working at the Gibb’s House planting posts and assisting in various small projects at the Office for Sustainability, the vast majority of my work has been toward developing and realizing the BroncoBike rental pilot. This summary will describe the work that I have completed, work that is ongoing or pending approval, and finally work that I expect, or hope, to be pursued by myself, or others in the future.

In order to rent bikes we needed bikes, so my first priority was to determine the ideal characteristics of a rental bike. Considering weather conditions, rental duration, and expected renter demographics, durability was the primary characteristic I looked for while researching bikes. Other characteristics included ease of use, comfort, attractiveness, and cost. After pouring through all the bikes available from 91 different bicycle companies, I narrowed my search to nine companies that produced commuter style bikes. After further review, this list was reduced to three specific bikes: the Civia Twin City 7, the Specialized Daily 3, and the Breezer Uptown 8. These three bikes were brought to the office (I had to drive to Indiana to get the Breezer) and tested by myself and other OfS employees and interns. Once this process was completed, and the feedback from the riders was analyzed, I decided that the Breezer was the bike we should use.

Because the nearest Breezer dealer is in Indiana, we decided that the easiest way to proceed would be to request a sole source purchase. For this I composed a sole source justification and filled in the paperwork, which was then submitted by Jeff Spoelstra and approved. My responsibility at this point was to communicate with purchasing and with the vendor to make sure the correct styles and sizes of bikes were being ordered and purchased. This process was facilitated with the help of Anne Copeland. I also communicated with facilities to pick up and drop off the bikes at the correct times and locations. Once the bikes arrived I tested and inspected each one, and with the help of Derek Kanwischer and Sean Kennedy hung the bikes from the studio rafters for “long-term” storage. Though the purchasing process has been reduced here to a few sentences, in reality it took weeks, so regular communication with Hilltop Bike, the vendor, was necessary to maintain a positive working relationship, which I did.
Throughout the purchasing process many other tasks needed to be completed for a successful fall launch. To secure a stock of bike helmets I contacted Mican DeBoer, Trauma Program Manager, at Borgess Medical Center. Through their helmet safety program, they were able to donate 20 helmets of various sizes. With this resource, I hope to be able to give, rather than rent, helmets to BroncoBike users. Another task vital to the pilot is a comprehensive rental and liability waiver. By researching these types of forms from other universities with bike rental programs I was able to compile what I feel is a sound agreement. This may be a “living” document of sorts, one that evolves as the rental program itself evolves. I also completed a best estimate cost analysis, giving us a range of expected annual operating costs to best determine fair rental prices.

In addition to these completed projects, there are still several objectives outstanding. Locks for the bikes have yet to be purchased. Locks are an obvious necessity, and though I’ve explored several different options, to this date there seems to be no consensus as to which direction we should go. This issue will have to be resolved in short order. Whether or not BroncoBike users should pay a deposit, and if so, the amount, also needs to be resolved as does the question of whether or not to purchase insurance for the bikes. Finally, an advertising campaign needs to begin as soon as possible in order to assure 100% rental. This campaign will include the use of flyers, organized bike rides, bike displays at various events and locations around campus, and pictures and links at wmich.edu/sustainability.

Looking forward to spring 2015 and beyond, I hope to see BroncoBikes begin to grow and evolve. Specifically, I would like to see this program rolled out in three main phases. Phase 1 is the current pilot, with semester long rentals and only available at the Office for Sustainability. Phase 2 will launch at the beginning of the spring 2015 semester. This phase will incorporate more rental duration options. At a minimum, monthly rentals will be available. Also, if demand dictates, more bikes may be purchased. The timing of Phase 3 is less concrete. The third phase is what I imagine BroncoBikes can be. This would include a greatly expanded fleet of bikes, including the possibility of more bike options, rental durations as short as same day, multiple locations to pick up and drop off bikes, rentable bike lockers, and more.