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How big can BlueBikes get?

Expansion will double number of cities and towns in the bike-share system

By [Adam Vaccaro](#) Globe Staff ,Updated August 6, 2020, 3:10 p.m.



A BlueBikes station in Boston Lane Turner

The [upcoming expansion](#) of the BlueBikes system will double the number of communities that use Greater Boston's public bicycle rental program, spurring interest in its potential to expand across the region.

For seven years, BlueBikes was limited to Boston, Cambridge, Somerville, and Brookline, gradually expanding to cover more neighborhoods, but never crossing their borders.

Not anymore. Everett [joined the network last year](#), and BlueBikes stations are arriving in Arlington, Newton, Watertown, Chelsea, and Revere throughout the summer.

It's causing other local leaders to consider whether they could join too.

"I would be more than open, and probably excited, to take a look at it," said Lynn Mayor Thomas McGee, who noted that construction is well underway on a major bike path linking his city to nearby communities, including Revere and Everett. "BlueBikes is obviously another piece of the puzzle, once you start seeing the infrastructure come into play."

Until now, most communities bordering the BlueBikes area had [experimented only with "dockless"](#) bike-rental systems, allowing riders to find and unlock bikes across the city with a smartphone. This model gave riders more flexibility but also sparked complaints when bikes blocked sidewalks or were left in random locations. It's unclear if that business model is viable; Lime, the company offering the service in this region, [pulled its bikes earlier this year](#) and has said it would prefer to focus on electric scooters.

The BlueBikes program differs considerably, and not only because riders travel between dedicated stations. While Lime merely sought government approval to operate its fleet on city streets, BlueBikes stations and vehicles are owned by participating communities and operated under separate contracts by the private ride-hail company Lyft. That means the cities and towns control the system and its growth.

"Part of the reason why the expansion is even possible in the first place is Boston and neighboring municipalities made a decision to own the system and invest in it," said Stacy Thompson, director of the advocacy group Livable Streets Alliance.

But that arrangement also means cities and towns must make a serious financial commitment to join. The five new communities are each paying \$100,000 for the infrastructure. Some are receiving state grants, and Lyft is also subsidizing the expansion, according to Eric Bourassa, transportation director for the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, a regional agency that helped negotiate the deal.

Still, some officials view the price tag as a barrier.

"I don't see us putting the money up," said Kevin Duffy, a business development officer in Malden, who said the dockless bikes were more convenient for trips between home and MBTA stations.

Quincy traffic director Chris Cassani said he is open to the idea, and that city investment could create a better system. But he was unsure that Quincy would be a good location for BlueBikes because it is so far removed from Boston's major commercial districts. It would work best, as a connection between dense residential areas and the city's Red Line train stations, he speculated.

This BlueBikes expansion is a two-year pilot project, and there's no guarantee it will succeed. But Lyft said it is open to conversations about bringing BlueBikes to other communities, particularly dense urban areas with good biking infrastructure. Bourassa said it may eventually make sense for the state or a regional organization to take greater control of BlueBikes as it expands, since it may be difficult to keep so many communities on the same page.

Galen Mook, director of the Massachusetts Bicycle Coalition, envisioned a future BlueBikes system with both docked and dockless bikes to appeal to different types of communities. Electric-powered bikes would also make it easier to travel longer distances between communities, he added.

Another potential model could include “satellite” communities that do not necessarily border BlueBikes cities but are reachable on public transit or ferries, Mook said, a concept Washington, D.C.’s bike-share system has explored. Provincetown or Framingham would make good candidates, he said.

Simply installing stations may not be enough to get people on bikes, said Vivian Ortiz, a cycling advocate in Mattapan, where BlueBikes stations were installed in 2018. She noted that ridership is higher at stations along the Neponset Greenway trail, but less in other parts of the Boston neighborhood, suggesting that creating better bike paths and lanes may be crucial to growing ridership in a new BlueBikes setting.

“You can pop a station there, but the infrastructure isn’t ready to have less-experienced riders,” she said.