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Editorial | Bike-sharing expansion

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In its first seven months in C-U, the bike vendor VeoRide Inc. reported 14,800 unique bike riders and 165,000 total bike rides — during some of the worst bike-riding months of the year. Now it is about to convert many of its bikes to electric models and hopes to expand the number of bikes in town.

The city governments in Champaign and Urbana are assessing whether to update their intergovernmental agreement with the bike-sharing company VeoRide Inc. VeoRide now is the only bike-sharing vendor operating in the community, although two other companies have approached Champaign officials about applying for a license beginning July 1.

Last year, when local officials were planning to implement bike sharing in the community, they had estimated there would be three to five vendors and as many as 2,500 bicycles available for sharing on the streets. But since VeoRide was the only company to take the risk on the first round of licensing, there are just 500 dockless bikes in the community. Urbana city planner Lily Wilcock told the city council last week there has been enough demand for the shared bikes that it may be appropriate to increase the number of bikes VeoRide is permitted to operate. City council members seemed to agree, and it is likely VeoRides now will be capped at something like 750 bikes. But nothing is set and if citizens have a different idea now is the time to speak up. The current intergovernmental agreement expires June 30.

There have been complaints about the way the shared bikes have been parked around parts of Champaign-Urbana, particularly on narrow downtown sidewalks and on walkways on campus. VeoRide has recently begun to offer users suggestions about where to park unused bikes, in safer and less-congested places. And Wilcock said that the number of complaints about the bikes has dropped over time from one to three a week last September to virtually none now.

VeoRide plans to replace 150 of its pedal bikes with electric models in the next few weeks, making it easier for some users to get around town in a move that likely will attract even more customers. The electric bikes come with an 18 mph governor and a higher cost: one dollar to unlock the bikes plus a charge of 15 cents a minute. The pedal bikes cost 50 cents for 15 minutes.

The shared bicycles add to the transportation options in Champaign-Urbana, offering a convenient, affordable way to get around town without adding to street congestion and pollution. Local governments should continue to encourage their use, and citizens should speak out now if they have suggestions for improving the service.