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This Big Apple economic engine is called the bicycle

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Home-grown Bike and Roll exemplifies growing use of pedal power for everything from tourism to transportation and logistics

You'd think that the March 22nd conference "Bikes on the Brooklyn Waterfront" would focus on taking idyllic bicycle rides along the new Brooklyn Bridge Park. But Richard Hanley, director of the Brooklyn Waterfront Research Center, says the conference is also about jobs. Who knew that bicycling is creating employment in Brooklyn and New York?

In opening remarks at the conference -- organized by the New York City College of Technology (City Tech), which runs the research center -- Camille Kamga said "bikes are being used and are serving essential roles toward the economic vitality of the city."

Kamga is director of the University Transportation Research Center and a professor of Civil Engineering at CCNY. He cited several business uses of bicycles including transporting restaurant deliveries, cargo bicycles carrying last minute freight deliveries, the pedicab business and its increasingly role in attracting tourists.

Exemplifying a growing business is Bike and Roll, which launched six years ago in New York and has branched out to Miami, San Francisco, Washington D.C. and Chicago. Chris Wogas, its CEO, said it offers bike rentals and tours.

When it launched, it rented 50 bikes but now offers 2,000 cycles in its nine New York City locations. Some of its outposts are shops, and some stands. It costs from \$28 for two-hours to \$44 a day to rent a Tech cycle with 21 speeds, for example, plus a helmet (mandatory for riders 13 years and younger), lock and bike bag.

“We even offer mountain biking in upper Manhattan, tours of Governor’s Island, Central Park and Battery Park, and a bike and water tour including taking the water taxi,” he said.

Bike and Roll employs up to 350 people nationwide in the busy summer season including 125 staff in New York. Most staff specializes in customer service, and in summer, college students supplement the workforce.

It’s been expanding because “people are into the green movement,” Wogas said. Ten years ago, many people balked at bicycling because they were afraid that taxis and autos would crash and ram into them, but those fears have subsided. Only about 5% to 10% of its tours entail biking on city streets; most tours take place in the less congested atmosphere of parks where there are bike paths.

Tourism rings the registers at Bike and Roll. About 95% of its business stems from out-of-towners. “That’s partially our fault. We’re starting to develop products aimed at locals,” Wogas said

The rise of bicycle lanes, which now traverse over 200 miles snaking through the entire city, and the increased number of commuters who pedal to work, are creating a renaissance in the industry. Charlie McCorkell, owner of two Bicycle Habitat shops in SoHo and Park Slope that sell, rent and repair cycles, says about 30 new bike shops have opened in New York in the last few years. He said about 150,000 people bike to work daily.

“If you provide places for people to ride, they’ll ride,” McCorkell said. Biking to work via the Brooklyn Bridge, Queensboro Bridge and Manhattan Bridge has become so popular that the lanes are bursting to capacity.

Biking boosts tourism. “People go to Copenhagen and think bikes. They don’t think about canals,” McCorkell said. Since New York City attracted a whopping 50 million tourists in 2012, many opt to see the city from a bike, not just through the windows of a double-decker tour bus.

Bicycle enthusiasts are also sparking park development. Hanley noted, “Cyclists are champions of park development, especially along the waterfront.” He pointed out that the establishment of the Brooklyn Greenway Initiative, a 14-mile waterfront development initiative, sprang from the throngs of people attracted to Brooklyn Bridge Park. Even the spate of commuter ferries taking people to work in Manhattan attracts cyclists who alight and bike to the office.

If Bike Share, which has been postponed several times, finally debuts in May 2013, it will spark even more interest in biking. New Yorkers can rent bikes in one location and return it to another for a reasonable fee. Sponsored by Citigroup, it will consist of 600 stations, offering 10,000 bikes in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens. Skeptics question whether the bikes can withstand the tough, pot-holed streets of New York and the possibility of damage.

At the conference, David Herlihy, author of “Bicycle: The History,” said bicycling fads have flourish and faded in the city. But the current revival looks as if it’s lasting, not a shooting star. “It’s the most sensible way to get around the city,” he said.

“The more the city makes the streets bike friendly, the more people will ride their bikes and find even more ways to create revenue and jobs,” stated Hanley, who is also a professor of English at City Tech.



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A computer-generated image shows a view of a Citi Bike station in New York last June. The Citi Bike system will consist of 600 stations