

City sets goBerkeley transportation program in motion

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Five members of the city of Berkeley team who have been working to develop goBerkeley over the past year. Photo: Emilie Raguso

City officials and several regional transportation agencies held a special event in front of the Berkeley City Hall on Thursday morning to announce the launch of a new program — called goBerkeley — designed to alleviate traffic congestion, pollution and parking problems.

Berkeleyside has previously covered the part of the program that will result in temporary metered parking changes in three of the city's business districts: downtown, Telegraph Avenue (Southside) and the Elmwood. Thursday morning was the public launch of the campaign.

The thinking behind the two-year pilot program is that making it easier to park and promoting alternative transportation will reduce congestion and air pollution. The idea is to test the combined effects of transit passes, car-sharing, demand-responsive parking and programs to encourage bicycling and walking.

The city of Berkeley is working with a wide range of partners, including AC Transit, City CarShare, TransForm the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the Federal Highway Administration and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District to develop goBerkeley.

"We sort of dreamed it up in my office right after we had a few glasses of wine, for lunch," said Mayor Tom Bates, with a laugh, in his public remarks Thursday. He noted that the program is ambitious and

comprehensive, and said he is excited about the broad partnerships and possibilities of goBerkeley. The Berkeley community, he continued, is the ideal place for innovative practices. “This is a community that really cares, a community that’s interested to find alternatives to driving.... And it’s a community that not only cares but does something about it.”

Thursday morning, AC Transit Board President Greg Harper said Berkeley often serves as a “proving ground” for innovative programs, because the city thinks holistically about how to solve problems. It’s a place, he said, where ideas that sound “nutty” can be shown to work, and used as an example for other areas.

In his remarks before a group of about 50 people who gathered Thursday for the launch, Brent O’Brien, member experience director with City CarShare, echoed Harper, saying Berkeley is a place where best practices can be developed and demonstrated to a wider audience. City Carshare has partnered with the city of Berkeley for about 10 years, and O’Brien said programs like it are effective in fighting congestion and pollution because every vehicle in its fleet serves essentially to get 10-15 other vehicles off the road.

As part of goBerkeley, City CarShare is adding more locations and vehicles, and providing up to \$200 in annual discounts to interested businesses, as well as other incentives for local residents. The organization has set a goal to take 20,000 cars off Bay Area roads by 2020, and O’Brien said programs like goBerkeley will be important in meeting that goal.

The city will also give out 1,000 free one-year AC Transit passes to employees of businesses in the downtown area, Southside and the Elmwood, as part of goBerkeley. Representatives from some of those businesses — La Méditerranée on College Avenue, the Tibetan Aid Project, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Copy Central and Earth Island Institute — attended Thursday’s event to pick up their passes as part of the presentation.

Harper of AC Transit, said after the event that, to get people out of their cars, “you have to do a dozen things right” — from incentives to ease and frequency of transportation options. “To get all those things right is really hard.”

He credited Mayor Bates with having the vision to bring together all the partnering organizations to make that possibility a reality.

Willa Ng, the city’s project manager for goBerkeley, said it had taken at least a year of “working behind the scenes” to get goBerkeley off the ground. She too credited the mayor with his leadership and vision.

“Even though he has given up his car and walks everywhere, or takes public transit,” she said, “he’s been the ‘driving force’ behind the goBerkeley program.”

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