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Helmet vending machines to debut at four Boston Hubway stations this month

Posted by Matt Rocheleau August 6, 2013 11:39 AM

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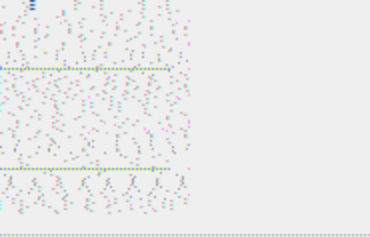
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(HelmetHub)

A rendering of the latest design for the HelmetHub vending machines, four of which are in production right now.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Vending machines that will dispense bike helmets to either rent or buy are scheduled to debut at four Hubway bike share stations in Boston at the end of August.

“Boston will be the first city in the US to do this,” said Nicole Freedman, head of the city’s bicycle programming. “The real goal is to make sure cyclists in Boston are wearing helmets as much as possible.”

City officials, including Mayor Thomas M. Menino, are scheduled to hold a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Monday, Aug. 26, for one of the first HelmetHub machines, which will be attached to a Hubway station outside the Boston Public Library in Copley Square, said Freedman, director of Boston Bikes.

Locations for the other three pilot helmet vending machines have not yet been finalized, but Freedman said they will likely be installed at Hubway stations that attract the highest amount of “casual ridership,” or riders who are least likely to wear helmets.

The top Hubway stations for casual ridership are at: Beacon and Arlington streets, Boylston and Arlington Streets, Charles Circle, North Station and South Station, she said.

Pricing has also not been finalized, but Freedman expects the machines will charge users \$2 to rent a helmet for 24 hours. To buy the helmets, the cost will be “in the \$20 range,” she said.

At least for the initial roll out of the program, the kiosks will only accept payment by credit card, she said. Helmets can be rented or bought for use with

any bike, Hubway or otherwise.

Riders who fail to return a rented helmet within 24 hours, will become the helmet's owner and their credit card will be charged accordingly, Freedman said.

Returned helmets will be collected and brought to a warehouse to be inspected, cleaned and sanitized before being put back into the machines to be rented again or bought.

When a person approaches the machine to return a helmet, a radio-frequency identification, or RFID, chip inside the helmet will tell a slot on the machine to open so the helmet can be deposited, she said. The RFID chip will also tell the machine who had originally rented the helmet and when it was rented.

Each helmet will be "unisex," featuring an adjustable strap in the back to fit heads of varying magnitude, Freedman said.

A machine will hold between 30 and 36 helmets. The kiosks are specially designed to lock into existing Hubway stations.

On average, each machine costs about \$10,000, she said. The machines will be paid for through a mix of funding from grants, sponsorships, advertising and revenue collected from the Hubway system.

To design and produce the machines, the city contracted HelmetHub, a company based in South Boston's Innovation District and founded by a **group of MIT students** who first developed prototypes of a helmet vending machine nearly two years ago for a class project at the university.

Freedman said she was asked in 2011 by the students' professor for ideas of projects his class could work on. She suggested the class could try to figure out a way to couple helmets with Hubway. A semester later, the students presented a working model of a helmet vending machine.

"It's a brilliant design," Freedman said.

The machines and the software they will run on will be purposefully designed to be flexible to allow for potential changes.

For example, the kiosks may be reprogrammed later to work with Hubway keys, which are used by annual and monthly Hubway members to unlock bikes.

Officials may later make unlimited helmet rentals free with a Hubway membership, perhaps at an additional one-time cost. Or they may make helmet rentals standard with any Hubway rental.

Helmet pricing and the deadline for rental returns can also be easily adjusted if officials want to make changes as they test out the first-of-its-kind program.

“The simpler and least expensive we can make it, the more successful it will be,” she said.

Freedman said she hopes that another 10 helmet vending machines will be installed within six weeks after first four.

From there, officials will monitor the devices to try to determine what ratio will work best city-wide – whether there should be a machine at every bike share station or perhaps only at a half or one-third of Hubway stations.

She said she knows of only one other city in the world where helmet vending machines have been installed – Melbourne, Australia. But, Freedman said that from what she knows the machines there offer far fewer features than the ones Boston will soon roll out.

The Melbourne machines, for instance, do not attach to the bike share stations; helmets must be paid for at another location and then can be picked up at the kiosks; and the devices do not accept helmet returns, requiring users to return the safety gear elsewhere.

“We’ll really be pioneering the way,” she said.

Last year, a study conducted in Boston and Washington D.C., which has a similar bike-share system similar to Hubway, found that 19 percent of people on shared bikes wore helmets, compared to 51 percent of people on their own bikes who wore helmets.

Research suggests that wearing helmets during a crash could decrease the risk of head injury and brain injury by 65 to 88 percent

of head injury and brain injury by 65 to 80 percent.

City officials have tried [various campaigns](#) in recent years to promote helmet use.

Subsidized helmets, as inexpensive as \$7.99, can be bought at select Boston area stores, which are listed [here](#). Helmets can also be bought and shipped to the buyer when signing up for a Hubway membership.

In May, Menino set a goal to cut the cyclist crash injury rate in Boston 50 percent by 2020 through measures based on findings of a [city-commissioned study](#) that compiled years of data on bike collisions in the city, including statistics on the locations and times of crashes, helmet use, and bicyclist and motorist behavior. The report also contained a number of [recommendations](#) to improve bike safety.

City officials also said at the time they may seek to have a law passed that would require all cyclists to wear a helmet while in Boston.

On Monday, Freedman said city officials are holding off for now on pushing the passage of such a law.

“What we want to do is see how far we can get with encouragement, marketing, pushing the helmet vending machines and working with police enforcement,” she said.

State law mandates that bike riders 16 years of age or younger wear a helmet while in Massachusetts.

In Boston, 10 cyclists have died in crashes since 2010, according to Freeman. Though, half of those deaths occurred over a recent one-year span between last summer and [this spring](#).

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(Video by Essdras M Suarez/Globe Staff, Produced by Lane Turner/Globe Staff)

A video taken in late 2011 demonstrates an earlier version of the HelmetHub helmet vending kiosk.

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