

Mobile app joins forces with businesses to reward cyclists for pedal power

By Brock Weir

A new app in York Region is joining forces with local businesses to reward cyclists for getting their bikes out to get where they need to go.

Biko, a free mobile app, has arrived in York Region with the aim of encouraging people to leave their cars at home for a little while and dust off their bikes to get around.

It's not an app, however, that just measures your kilometres or the number of calories burned over the course of your ride; for each kilometer you cycle, you get closer and closer to some rewards from local businesses and organizations, including York Region Transit.

According to app developers, Biko's primary goal is to improve the quality of life in urban cities through three ways: improved mental and physical health, reduced pollution and better mobility and means of transportation.

Incentivizing biking through rewards has real benefits, they say, as, since its national launch in 2015, Biko users have collectively travelled 35,546,029 kilometres and reduced their carbon emissions by 4,620,984 kg.

'This is a free app that rewards cyclists for cycling around their city,' says Molly Millar, Biko's Canadian manager. 'Before you hop on your bike, you go into the app and click Start. You then peddle off to your destination and the app is doing all its calculations behind the scenes. When you get to your destination, you press Stop and you will see for every kilometre you cycle, you will get a Biko. As you accumulate your Bikos, you can go into the Rewards tab and see rewards from local businesses across York Region as well as national partners. You can exchange your Bikos on anything from coffee to yoga.'

Biko arrived in York Region on September 23, first launched in the City of Markham. Since then, it has expanded northward. The app developers say they see York Region as a prime market with 'huge potential' to encourage more cycling. The 'urban cyclists' are out there, they say, but sometimes they need a boost.

'I am an urban cyclist myself and when I say that, I use my bike to come into work, to go and see friends and as a social activity,' says Ms. Millar, who is based in Vancouver. 'There has never been an app specifically for me. The competitive cyclists all have their apps, but this is an app for me and my target group of users. It encourages me to hop on my bike and earn rewards and then connects me with the local community of businesses.'

In bringing businesses on board as partners, Ms. Millar says it all comes down to improving quality of life in the community.

'If you're encouraging people to cycle more and drive a little bit less, you're helping the environment because people are polluting a little bit less,' she says. 'If you're encouraging people to cycle, it has an excellent health benefit: exercise is great for the body and even better for the mind. By encouraging people to cycle, you're helping the mobility of your city. You're encouraging a better, more liveable city. On the business side of things, this app is a marketing tool. Businesses put up to three rewards on the app and local residents can scroll through every day, and we drive business to our local partners.'

Locally, Biko's partners include a number of restaurants, fitness studios and transportation bodies, such as York Region Transit and Green Storage. Newmarket's Balanced Body Breakthrough, for instance, offers \$10 off one hour of athletic therapy or massage therapy in exchange for 30 Bikos. York Region Transit offers 10 YRT/Viva Adult Passes for 120 Bikos, and Green Storage offers significant discounts on storage units and boxes.

'Essentially, in exchange for cycling, you're able to get a free bus ride and I think the synchronicity between public transportation and cycling is so amazing,' says Ms. Millar. 'It's what we want to encourage in our cities as we're trying to shift the mode a little bit away from the private vehicle into a more shared resource.'

'What I would love to see one year from now is York Region residents, be they in Aurora or Newmarket, waking up on a Saturday morning and making decisions about what they are doing based around some fantastic rewards in the app, whether it is going to a museum during the day and getting discounted entry for Bikos and deciding to go out for dinner that evening because one of their favourite restaurants is on the app. I would love to see it incorporated into people's daily or weekly enjoyment of their lives.'

Biko was founded by Enrique Cuellar, Emilio Pombo and Tomas Bleier in Colombia in 2015. Since then, it has spawned a network of over 300 companies throughout North and South America.

Biko can also be tailored for walking or running, and is available free through the App Store or through Google Play. For more information, visit bikoapp.com.