

# Iowa City Bike Library



## Problem

In Iowa City, a university town with a largely transient student population, many bicycles were abandoned or brought to the landfills. Some students, especially international students who were in Iowa City for a short time, were reluctant to purchase a bicycle because they knew they wouldn't be able to take it with them when they left the city. Although the local economy supported several bicycle shops, there were few opportunities to purchase a lower-cost, used bicycle in good repair.

## Background

A local citizen recognized that the surplus bicycles could provide people with affordable transportation, and looked for a way to get the bicycles he collected and repaired to the public who needed them. He used a table at the farmers' market to distribute the bicycles he mended. Initially called the Iowa City Community Bike Project, the program quickly became popular, attracting both eager patrons and volunteers. Several other community members, also interested in bicycle repair, stepped up to help.

## Solution

At first, the limiting factor was lack of space. Iowa City officials agreed to provide a location for repair work and a non-profit retail operation where the public could come and check out the bicycles. The city offered an abandoned building (a former sporting goods shop), charging \$1 per year for rent. Another step in establishing the program on a more permanent level was having a full-time AmeriCorps volunteer to help organize and administer the project for one year. The program also gained support and stability by finding a sponsoring non-profit organization, Environmental Advocates.

The Iowa City Bike Library (ICBL) has served the community from a convenient downtown location since 2004. Numerous used bicycles — in widely varying conditions — are donated each week. Skilled volunteer mechanics attend Repair Nights twice weekly to refurbish donated bicycles. Other volunteers attend a weekly Salvage Night to reclaim usable parts from bicycles that cannot be repaired. With about a dozen regularly active (and another dozen occasional) volunteers, the ICBL is able to provide four to eight repaired bicycles each week. This number includes bicycles that have been loaned out and returned. Upon return, bicycles are given a full safety and maintenance inspection before being loaned out again. The Bike Library is open to the public once a week for three hours on Saturday. During this time, bicycles can be checked out, returned or donated.



The Iowa City Bike Library depends on the skill of its volunteer mechanics.

Patrons checking out bicycles must leave a deposit which ranges from \$20 to \$80, depending upon the quality of the bicycle. If the bicycle is returned within six months, the full deposit amount is refunded less any damage beyond normal wear and tear. Patrons may choose to keep their bicycles (and many do); deposits are automatically forfeited after six months. During the six-month check-out period, the Bike Library will provide repair service for bicycles with no charge for labor. The Bike Library purchases helmets, which are provided with bicycle check-out for no additional charge.

# Iowa City Bike Library — Iowa City, IA

## Results

More than 650 bicycles have been donated and repaired during the Bike Library's four years of operation. The number of bicycles repaired and checked out has increased dramatically each year. As of May 2008, the Bike Library provides an average of six repaired bicycles each week. During the busy season (April through October), the demand for bicycles is steady; regularly all of the Bike Library's prepared bicycles are checked out within half an hour. In addition to recycling bicycles, the Bike Library has diverted 7,000 pounds of scrap metal from the landfill. The majority of that metal was transported to the scrap yard by bicycle and trailer.



A patron checks out a bicycle on a busy Saturday at ICBL.

## Cost

The start-up cost for tools, benches and bicycle stands was about \$3,500. The income from forfeited deposits is enough to pay for the helmets that ICBL gives away, as well as replacement tools and equipment as needed. Some income is also generated by selling used parts, donated items such as car racks, panniers and pumps, and scrap metal. Because operating space is donated by the City of Iowa City, bicycles are donated by community members, and labor is donated by volunteers, the Bike Library is self-sustaining on a very small income.

## Web sites

Iowa City Bike Library: [www.bikelibrary.org](http://www.bikelibrary.org) and <http://www.bikelibrary.blogspot.com>

This article about ICBL features two videos: <http://iowaindependent.com/showDiary.do?diaryId=2239>

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### *Image Source*

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For more information, please visit the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center Web site at [www.walkinginfo.org](http://www.walkinginfo.org).

