Erich Lange

Hello, listeners. I'm Erich Lange.

Andrew Carpenter

And I'm Andrew Carpenter.

Erich Lange

In this episode, we are going to the big Easy. That's right, New Orleans, Louisiana. We are joined by Geoff Coats and Patrick Urbine of Blue Krewe, the nonprofit organization that faithfully operates Blue Bikes NOLA, a community driven bike share that is catalyzing economic growth, improving community health, and increasing the use of existing transit infrastructure throughout New Orleans. Thank you both for joining us today. We are excited to learn more about your bike share program, but first tell us more about yourself.

Geoff Coats

My name is Geoff Coats. I am the CEO and founder of Blue Krewe, the community run nonprofit that manages and operates Blue Bikes here in New Orleans. I've lived in New Orleans since the mid-nineties. I'm a lifelong cyclist and a bit of a serial entrepreneur here in the city. And back in 2017, I sold my previous business and was happy to be chosen to help launch bike share here in New Orleans with Social Bicycles out of Brooklyn and ran the system for Social Bicycles. And then we were acquired by Uber and I ran it for Uber for a couple years, and then when they exited the market, founded the nonprofit Blue Krewe in order to bring community run bike share to the city of New Orleans.

Patrick Urbine

My name is Patrick Urbine. I'm the Community Engagement Manager for Blue Krewe. I'm originally from Philadelphia, but I've been riding around New Orleans for the past 6 years. And I originally came to the city to pursue my undergrad at Tulane University. I graduated in 2021 and since then have been working alongside Geoff to bring Blue Bikes and expand bike share back and throughout New Orleans.

Andrew Carpenter

With that in mind, could you tell us a little bit about the bike scene in New Orleans?

Geoff Coats

New Orleans is in many ways a wonderful city for biking. It's very flat. It's a compact city. We often joke that people think of New Orleans as a city, and in reality it's kind of a big small town. It is size constrained by the Mississippi River and by Lake Pontchartrain. So it's pretty easy to get from a lot of different parts of town very quickly across town. It's not sprawled out a lot of modern cities might be. That said, it also has its challenges in terms of bike infrastructure with the alluvial soils that we have from being built here in the delta. A lot of our streets take on interesting contours, which can be a challenge sometimes. And then also New Orleans was kind of new to the game in terms of starting to really build bike infrastructure and install dedicated bike lanes. ~~So~~ I would say it's a city that is meant to be ridden around with a bicycle and we just keep improving the available infrastructure and the ability to ride safely.

Patrick Urbine

Building off of what Geoff said, New Orleans is a major city located in the southeastern part of Louisiana, located at the mouth of the Mississippi. We're in the Mississippi River delta right on the Gulf of Mexico. And through that New Orleans as a city has always really been defined in a lot of ways by our community's relationship to water as well as to the different forms of transportation that were really en vogue and popular at the time. ~~So~~ prior to New Orleans being a city, the land that the city currently is on was called Bulbancha, and it means place of many tongues. So it was a space that was really for cultural and community exchange as well as an exchange of commerce for indigenous and native communities in the area. And when the city of New Orleans was founded in 1718, at the time, the primary way of moving around was via waterways. So up and down the Mississippi having access to the Gulf, these were the real highways of the time. And also once you were on land, you're primarily walking around or you're on horse. So with that, New Orleans has a really compact historic core to the city that's really unique to some of the other older cities in the United States ~~as well.~~ ~~And~~ as the city got older, new ways of transportation were introduced. So in the 1800s we saw the introduction of street cars, and with that, the city was able to grow outside of its historic center and start to become a little less dense, but still dense enough to be able to support those street cars. In the 1900s, we have the age of the automobile and the city really starts to spread out into these further areas. But as Geoff mentioned, New Orleans having that historic core is really a dense, very walkable, very bike-able city. And what's also nice is because we're in a river delta, it's very flat, which makes biking not super hard, and it's an awesome space for bike share to exist.

Erich Lange

That does seem like the kind of perfect combination of just everything for a bicycle city, but also just multimodal transportation in general. I'm really looking forward to visiting and getting to bike around there one day. I want to go back to really kind of the beginning of this project. And I know that you shared that it's kind of had a couple different iterations, but Blue Bikes relaunched NOLA's bike share operation after a stalled pilot project in 2017. Can you share more about the history of that project and how it's kind of changed over the years and to get where it is today?

Geoff Coats

I like to sort of place the beginnings of bike share in New Orleans really in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina right when the city was looking at rebuilding. And for the first time there was really a lot of this community input. There was a lot of ideas floating around about how to rebuild the city, what could be done the same, and what could be done differently. And through a lot of those conversations, one of the themes that surfaced was livability. Right? How can we create neighborhoods that are walkable, bikeable, where people are safe, have access to food, all of these types of things. Right? And out of those conversations starting in sort of 2006, 7, 8, 9, what you get is a lot more community input around this idea of biking infrastructure. So you start to see the first bike lanes being installed in the city, and eventually the conversation is animated by what people are seeing in Paris in these first early sort of bike share operations. And there's this question of, well, what could New Orleans have that same thing? ~~So~~ a group of community members came together to advocate generally Bike Easy was one of our nonprofit, which advocates for biking infrastructure was really integral in this effort. But a lot of community came, members came together and then went to the city to say, hey, this is something maybe we should explore. And, you know, you referred to a pilot project. That pilot project was really before 2017. That was sort of a proof of concept, could bike share work here? And the city put out some bikes in partnership with Social Bicycles, ran some testing on it, and indeed it looked like it was going to be a good fit. So the city then put out a request for proposals for bike share, and the entity that was selected to run was Social Bicycles out of Brooklyn. The model that the city decided to go with was a for-profit model, ~~right,~~ with the city not contributing financially into bike share, but hoping that the market forces would be able to bring bike share to the community. And so in December of 2017, we launched here in New Orleans with a fleet of 700 pedal bikes and about 65, 70 stations. So that system got up and running, was becoming successful. People in New Orleans were getting introduced to bike share. And about 10 months later, Social Bicycles was acquired by Uber. And so we all then became Uber employees and the market became part of Uber's efforts to enter this micro-mobility space, sort of that fancy word for bike share and then scooters and flying hover boards or whatever comes next. So then for the next couple years really 2018, 2019 into early 2020, the market was run by Uber as part of the Jump brand. We scaled from our 700 original bicycles, pivoted to e-bikes and scaled to about 1,350 e-bikes in early 2020. But then the pandemic hit and ~~when the pandemic hit,~~ Uber decided to exit all of their markets globally in micro-mobility and just sort of get out of that play. And so at that point, the city of New Orleans lost its bike share. All the bikes went away. And during the pandemic when everybody was looking for something to do and a lot of people were trying to ride bikes, suddenly we didn't have any bikes. And so I began at that point to have a conversation about bringing that bike share back to New Orleans. But, you know, really I think what we learned through that process is that the market forces can bring a lot of capital, which is great because you can run a lot of experiments. You can try things. You can lose money. But as a city, if you're trying to build transit for people, which is how we ~~kind of~~ look at this. This is equitable transit for the community. Those same people can look at a spreadsheet in San Francisco one day and decide that your city doesn't need bike share anymore, and then it just all of your effort and all of your investment evaporates.

Erich Lange

It sounds like you're kind of at the whim of greater market forces, which depending on which way the wind was blowing, it may or may not ultimately didn't work out very well at that time, but you're able to kind of re-look at that, particularly during COVID and ultimately come out to be kind of stronger. The community who was ultimately behind this and using it and supporting it, came out during COVID and was looking to do something, but the tools, the bikes weren't really operational. How did you leverage that to come out and be stronger, make it a better program?

Geoff Coats

~~So~~ it really was a community effort. Right? So I began early on having conversations just to test the waters. You know, my take was that New Orleans had learned how to run bike share on other people's money, and now we could take those learnings and do it ourselves, if we could bring the right partners to the table. Right? And so I began having conversations with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Louisiana, who was the original title sponsor of Blue Bikes. I also was talking with Bike Easy, the local bike advocacy nonprofit here in New Orleans led by Dan Favor. And then also with the Greater New Orleans Foundation, and Andy Kopplin is the president and CEO over there as well as the city and the mayor's office of Transportation to try and see if we could bring the pieces of the puzzle back together. And when I say this was a community effort, I mean we had things. We all knew we wanted to bring bike share back, but we weren't sure at the beginning whether or not we would be able to. But, for instance, I was able to set up a partnership. Uber wanted to get rid of everything that was in the warehouse but didn't really have a plan for what to do with it other than to just get rid of it. So we were able to work with other nonprofits like Bike Easy in town to say like, hey, we shouldn't throw all of these tools and these bike stands and all of this infrastructure away. Can we donate it to you? And if we're able to relaunch bike share, maybe you donate it back to us. And people were open to those sorts of creative solutions. ~~Right?~~ And so we were able to keep certain pieces and parts that we thought might be useful. We were able to build a coalition. The city was open to the possibility of having a new agreement with this new nonprofit. Blue Cross and Blue Shield was open to sponsoring it if we could get it relaunched. And the Greater New Orleans Foundation was open to providing bridge funding so that that period where we have to hire people and we have to be doing work in between not having bikes and having bikes that we could begin to rent a warehouse, get paid, set things up. And so with all of those pieces in place, we were able to find the path forward and align around this nonprofit model which would make hopefully creating a sustainable system. And we mean that when we talk about sustainability in every sense of the word, the environmental sustainability, but also financially and fiscally sustainable. The goal is we don't want to put in another three to five years and have it disappear again. So how do we build this in a way that we are here to serve the community for the long term?

Patrick Urbine

You know, if you're trying to make money, bike share probably isn't the industry to get into. It's not the money making scene, so to speak. But what Geoff talked about with fiscal responsibility is very important because in terms of bike share, New Orleans is a very unique market and a unique city because we have a huge population of riders from New Orleans who are residents of New Orleans as well as influxes of tourists throughout the year, during various parts of the year. And our high tourism season is typically from the fall around the start of football season until about the end of festival season, which is usually May, June. That's the peak of tourism in New Orleans. So in terms of fiscal responsibility, you know, being a community run effort is so important because when you design a bike share program for and by the community, you're ensuring that that community is going to be able to use it in a way that makes sense for them. And there is a model out there where it may make sense to have just built a bike share program that functions to specifically move tourists around the city itself. And that may work within a very small footprint of the city, but in order for bike share to really serve this larger purpose of expanding transportation options in a healthy and environmentally sustainable way that truly is transformative, having that community run aspect is really important, as Geoff mentioned, for not just the immediate term, but also for the long-term sustainability. So really ensuring that bike share isn't around for the next two years, but it's around for the next 200 years.

Andrew Carpenter

I would love a 200 year old bike share system, a legacy system if you will. So you're really focused on making this a core part of the community. And so as a mobility option, how would you say bike share fits in as a pillar of community development in New Orleans?

Geoff Coats

So in terms of the system design and how we think about this as equitable transit for the community, I think about transit in terms of if you build a transit system that works for locals, and Pat touched on this, tourists will use it because if it works, it works. But the flip side is, I feel like sometimes in New Orleans has been guilty of this at certain points, you build a transit system based off of tourism and then it may or may not work and often doesn't work for the locals. And so one of the things that we've really worked is we try to think about in terms of that community development piece, where are the transportation deserts? The city of New Orleans created something called the bike equity index. And in that it sort of creates a neighborhood by neighborhood scales that combine things like access to car, access to transit, age, different demographic data. In designing the system, we were very conscious of incorporating these different neighborhoods which score higher and lower on this transportation equity index, and then also trying to integrate with public transit. New Orleans in the last few years, like many cities, has been challenged by an affordable housing issue where the core is getting more and more expensive to live in, but all the people who need to work in the jobs in the core are getting sort of pushed far out. And so sometimes we're looking at if someone is commuting from work within our system area to a job within our system area, we might have that whole piece. Right? But there's also a lot of people who are maybe taking the RTA, the regional transit buses coming in from neighborhoods that maybe we don't serve and then getting dropped, but where they get dropped might still be 20 minute walk from their job down in the French Quarter, down in the CBD, or wherever, in the lower garden district. So we then can be that partner whereby instead of having to walk 20 minutes and then walk 20 minutes back, maybe you can grab a bike and then that becomes a four minute ride and that gives you back 15 minutes of your life to do something else with.

Patrick Urbine

In terms of community development, Blue Bikes provides a ton of benefits to the larger New Orleans community. And speaking to how bike share is really this very transformative and if done well and then done intentionally can be a very sustainable form of transportation that is addressing environmental community development, providing economic stimulus, as well as improving the community health. So within the larger United States, we know that as we talk about decarbonization and trying to reach net zero that currently the transportation sector is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the United States. When we look at our economy, transportation, the transportation sector represents about 27% of greenhouse gas emissions, and the typical US household takes about four trips in their personal vehicle per day. So where bike share comes into play is really revolutionizing transportation with how folks are able to reduce those four trips in their personal vehicle, and if they can substitute that for maybe one or two or all of their trips on a bike, is really a small local solution that's getting to this very larger issue. So we know that with the climate crisis, the issues are global in scale, but the solutions are local in nature. So that's where Blue Bikes is really transformational here in New Orleans. As well as we talk about community development in terms of economics, we've talked about how Blue Bikes is providing access to transportation in the city of New Orleans, about one in five New Orleanians, about 20% of New Orleanians do not have access to a car. So Blue Bikes is transformational in that regards as well by expanding access to transportation, allowing folks to access both places of work, but to also access other areas such as health, such as access to healthy foods, to being able to move around the city and really enact their right to the city. And then the other big way that Blue Bikes is helping community development is through health. Bike share is healthy. It's active transportation that is getting people out of the seclusion of their personal vehicle and getting onto the seat of a bike and moving in a very human scaled way throughout the community. New Orleans is a very social city and being able to bike, we see a lot of folks hopping onto Blue Bikes and joining larger social rides and kind of forming community within that as well. So Blue Bikes is touching on environmental sustainability. It's addressing economics, expanding access to transportation options in the city, as well as really promoting the development of community and social spaces.

Erich Lange

The other kind of piece of this equity puzzle in my mind is the pricing model. can you explain a little bit more about how you make it fiscally equitable.

Patrick Urbine

With the Blue Bikes program, we have three primary ways of accessing the bike share program. The first is the pay as you go, which we joke is kind of for people with commitment issues, you know, first time users, and that's a dollar to unlock and then 15 cents per minute. From there, the next option that we have is the Blue Bike's monthly membership. That's $25 per month and you get 60 minutes of ride time per day and there is no fee to unlock a bike. So that's a really nice option for long-term residents as well as visitors who are staying for a little bit more than just the weekend. And then the equity piece really comes in with our Blue Bikes for All program, which is a special membership category that is the exact same offering as our Blue Bikes monthly membership. It's priced at $4 per month and it's for recipients of SNAP and Medicaid. And through our community outreach efforts, we really are intentional about forming partnerships with organizations who work with folks who qualify for SNAP and Medicaid, such as local farmers markets and different federally qualified healthcare clinics, to be able to promote the Blue Bikes for All program and really ensure that there is knowledge about this program as well as enrollment in it. So right now our Blue Bikes for All program is some of our most dedicated riders. We see them constantly expanding the membership base, which is really exciting. And over the past year we were able to bring on a cohort of community liaisons thanks to the funding from the Better Bike Share Partnership, and that was six part-time community liaisons who came from different neighborhoods within our service area. And those were specifically neighborhoods that historically have not been provided the same transportation funding resources as other areas of the city, going back to what Geoff mentioned with the bike equity index. And through that we were able to do a lot of representative and intentional community engagement and outreach to promote the Blue Bikes for All program. During that year long period, we increased our ridership within the Blue Bikes for All program with a hundred new Blue Bikes for all riders. We also formed some key partnerships that allowed us to expand our Blue Bikes helmet giveaway and with our Blue Bikes helmet giveaway, ~~that's~~ thanks to the support of Healthy Blue. Through that we have been able to give out over 1,000 helmets to residents of New Orleans throughout the entire parish. And that's really thinking about equity being built into every aspect of how our organization moves and thinks about bike share, so both how we build our bike share network and then also thinking about potential barriers that may be prohibitive for folks to take that next step and to hop onto the saddle of a bike and get pedaling. So ensuring that there's access to free bike safety gear is something that we addressed early on and we're really excited to be able to continue to provide those free helmets to community members. Equity is something that we've been really intentional about building into all aspects. And having this community run bike share perspective and framework has been really integral in being able to incorporate that into how the organization moves.

Andrew Carpenter

That's awesome.

Geoff Coats ([00:26:41](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/4ZkUHNGVf0mBa5E7I80TzYCkWVZUJE9yDMoitRiNaLil4oQ3PgnQ80LGgjsTcv6uJ_Rp0AKMPYBwqzSuNpjbRXU1WaA?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1601.01)):

One of the learnings we took from our previous, so in our previous iteration we also had a Blue Bikes for All program, but part of our retooling was also to look back at that program and say, okay, what worked? And how can we do better and how can we hold ourselves accountable as well? And so two things that we noted. The previous iteration was an annual membership, but we also, in doing research, we learned that often a monthly lower amount is easier for people to sustain than having to come up with that one annual payment, so we switched to this monthly model based on that learning. There's also a question of geographic equity. So we could provide a plan for Blue Bikes for All members that was financially affordable to them, but if we don't also commit to having the bikes in their neighborhoods, then what good is that access plan? And so this was another learning. So what we did is again, sort of going back to this bike equity index, we worked with the city to identify the geographic boundaries of these areas, sub areas within our system that had these higher scores on the bike equity index and then took our fleet size and divided it by the square miles of the service area and then the sub areas to ensure that there's an equitable distribution on a daily basis of bikes within these zones. Basically it's the idea of how do we hold ourselves accountable to ensuring that not only do people have access to a program that they can afford, but that then we are also providing the transportation services when they walk out their door and need them.

Erich Lange

That's wonderful. It sounds like you were really just scrutinizing your analysis in many different ways to make sure that there were no assumptions, but also that things were equitable financially, geographically, and even through knowledge you mentioned having a strong and committed outreach How did you go to these neighborhoods or places that were historically left out and make sure that you're reaching them, helping them inform the process, knowing what they needed to use Blue Bikes? What was that process like? And particularly on the SNAP and the enrollment side, if you can touch a little bit more about how that was integrated into your model and especially making it easy for the team and for the community to use their benefits for something that might be often overlooked?

Patrick Urbine

New Orleans is a city of neighborhoods and something that we often think about is how it's so much easier to speak honestly and openly with someone who know and have had a relationship over an extended period of time. So the community liaison program is not an inherently new idea. It's something that has been implemented to other markets. And we actually found out about the liaison program that was implemented by the Divvy system in Chicago, and that was our inspiration for having a similar outreach team locally in New Orleans. And the idea is to identify and work with advocates who are really passionate about expanding access to equitable transportation in their neighborhoods and focusing on folks who are either long-term residents or long-term stakeholders of those communities. So that could be someone who is born and raised in a specific neighborhood. It could also be someone that is a faith leader or someone that has a small business in that area. All of those people are deeply tied to that community and folks are going to recognize them and feel more comfortable having a conversation with someone who they already know. So that was really important for us as we crafted our local community liaison program to really ensure that the voices were representative of the communities that we were doing outreach within to ensure that level of authenticity of relationship. And for our Blue Bikes for All program, the way that someone is able to become enrolled is that they set up a normal Blue Bikes account, and then from there they can either use the app to contact our customer support team directly or they can submit an email to Support@BlueBikesNOLA.com. That first email is something along the lines of, Hey, I'm really interested in getting enrolled in the Blue Bikes for All program. And then from there that rider would submit a picture of their SNAP or their Medicaid card and the customer support team would then send over the promo code or the unique membership code that would allow that rider to be able to access the Blue Bikes for All program. So something that we've been doing with the community liaison program that we were able to do was to identify different partners that are already doing a lot of work with community members that qualify for SNAP and Medicaid. So the Crescent City's Farmer Market operates in a couple different areas of the city, but within our service area, they have a weekly farmer's market every Thursday along the Lafitte Greenway, which is this really awesome rail to trail, multi neighborhood bike walking pedestrian boulevard corridor with a ton of playgrounds. It's one of the most impactful pieces of urban development that I think New Orleans has seen at least in the past decade. It's a really beautiful park system that integrates into the neighborhood, but the Crescent City's Farmer Market holds this Thursday market and through that they have a market match program where folks who are able to use their SNAP benefits and the market will match a dollar for a dollar. So your purchasing power doubles essentially. So automatically that's a perfect alignment with the types of organizations. So we were able to do weekly outreach at the farmer's market. Another example is working with Top Box Louisiana, which provides access to healthy foods to residents of the community. And through that we were able to develop a unique partnership where new Blue Bikes for All riders who've recently enrolled would then also receive a $10 discount on their next Top Box purchase. So just really thinking holistically about where are the existing organizations that are doing the work? Where is the existing synergy? And how can we not reinvent the wheel, but how can we support and elevate some of these other community efforts?

Andrew Carpenter

That's really cool, especially since it means testing can put its own kind of barrier up for people to participate in those programs. So if they've already done it once and now they're able to just kind of piggyback on what they've already done then that removes that barrier, which is really cool. ~~And so~~ from the transit agency's perspective, bike share systems can really work well as a compliment to transit systems. And so what should a transit agency know about a bike share system to be able to connect and integrate those services into help with that last mile that you brought up where people might get dropped off near but not near enough to their destinations and help them connect to them?

Geoff Coats

There's questions for me about first baby steps, but then also I think ultimate vision and I think ultimate vision is how can traditional transit models, buses, street cars, subways, whatever, that have these sort of dedicated routes and bike share, which is more of this mesh approach, really start to work together to have better outcomes. What we would like to see here in New Orleans, and I suspect we're not unique to a lot of communities, is that you can take the bus for the long distance move and then instead of having to either walk those last six blocks or eight blocks or wherever it is, if the bus route doesn't go exactly where you're trying to go to, how do we use the bike share and the micro-mobility to create opportunities so that people really have a seamless experience and they don't feel like either one of the solutions meets 70% of their need, but not all of it. And I think that's especially important in New Orleans. We're a city on the front lines of climate change down here on the Gulf of Mexico. The city and its climate action plan is looking to try and mode shift from single use automobile trips to transit and bike share, looking to try and do a 50% mode shift. Right? So in order to do that, we can't solve 70% of somebody's problem because if they do have access to a car, that's when they're just going to go ahead and say, well, I'll just hop in the car and make this work. So we've got to really think holistically about where people are starting their journey. Does bike share get you from your house to the transit line? Does bike share get you from the subway to your office? What are the ways that we connect? And like all transit that I know of in terms of the fair box, bike share is not going to make it without subsidies. It's not like this is a profit center that then can help subsidize, but if we all come to the table and think about ways that we can improve the rider experience and the user experience, then I think we're growing the pie and really helping to solve people's everyday transportation problems.

Patrick Urbine

One of the key things that transit agencies should know about bike share systems is the importance of intentionally designing multimodal transportation systems, effectively integrating them as well as maintaining them well. I think that those three pieces are key to success and the intentionally designed is really taking a second to look holistically about what is the current state of transportation and trying to identify tools such as the bike equity index to look at different neighborhoods and regions that would benefit from the expansion of multimodal transportation such as bike share. And then from there effectively integrating that multimodal transportation system with the existing public transit system. So you could have a bike station that is right at the port and doesn't connect to anything, and that may not serve anyone. But with this, it's really thinking intentionally about where are the spaces where folks are all already hopping off, maybe it looks like larger transfer stations or key intersections along different bus routes or train routes and localizing the Blue Bikes stations or bike share stations in close proximity. And then thinking outside of just that infrastructure, also thinking about what does off street shared use trails look like. I mentioned earlier, the Lafitte Greenway, which is this awesome protected bicycle and pedestrian boulevard that provides a really safe and efficient way for folks to move through a community. So is there an opportunity for a transit agency to both support the bike share, but also to support an effort to expand off-street shared use trails? Thinking about the expansion of protected bike lanes is also something that's really key. So really thinking about what does the existing infrastructure look like for folks to not just step onto the bus, not just step onto the train, but how are they walking to that station? How are they biking to that station? Are they ensuring that there is a crosswalk that cars are respecting that allows them to easily access? So that gets to where bike share fits nicely in which is this idea of really being that first and last mile connector and extending that existing trip and just really making it a lot more seamless for folks, for transit riders.

Geoff Coats

Speaking specifically to a partnership, let's say between transit agency and a local nonprofit bike share, because this calculus may change if you're dealing with one of the larger for-profit ones, but thinking about in terms of infrastructure development, what are things that you do really well or that are easy that may be almost impossible for a small nonprofit to do? As one of the things I'm, to give you a solid example of this would be as bike share pivots towards e-bikes, charging infrastructure becomes more and more important. One of our highest operational cost is swapping batteries out in the field. And a lot of people are now working on this idea of, well, what if we can charge the bikes in the actual parking docks and building that, which is a great idea and I'm fairly certain that's where the future lies, but for a small nonprofit to get power to one of the stations that we're going to put out in the street is a tremendous lift. The engineering, the trenching, the pouring of concrete, all of these things that you have to do would be a tremendous lift. Whereas a transit agency that maybe is already putting in a bus shelter with power to sell advertising, it might be a very low lift to say, hey, would you guys to wire into this, and we can share power somehow? And so trying to find these little spaces where what one entity is doing could really benefit the other one. And I think we could open some synergies with things like that. And then that would also lower the operational cost for the bike share, which would then create a more sustainable bike share. I mean so you get this sort of virtuous cycle that could potentially happen. The other thing I would note is for transit agencies, and I'm thinking here specifically really buses, if we want to have partnerships between transit and bike share, that means people are going to be on the road on bikes and anyone who has ridden a bike and had a bus come past you at 30 plus miles an hour knows it can be an unnerving experience. Right? And so thinking about also that type of partnership, is there training that bike advocates could bring to transit drivers? I saw a wonderful example of this. I think it was from Mexico City where they set out a stationary bike and the bus drivers would get on the stationary bike so they couldn't crash. And then another bus driver would drive a bus past them at 20 miles an hour and then 25 miles an hour and they would feel what it feels like. You know? And I think creating this empathy then between maybe that driver the next time they're out on the street may move over that extra foot may slow down just a little bit to make that pass. So I think there's a lot of really interesting things that could be accomplished once we really start talking to each other.

Andrew Carpenter

DC had a similar training method where all they put parking enforcement on bikes instead of in cars for a few weeks so that way they understood why cyclists keep telling them please get cars out of the bike lanes, and they started to get it.

Geoff Coats

That's wonderful.

Erich Lange

Yeah. You kind of have to see what it's like on the other side to really get it and build that empathy. Enlighten us on the process of what tools you have or had to have acquired, to develop your metrics or analysis that you could then go use in partnership, say with the transit agencies, to figure out where the gaps are in the network or where those synergies might exist.

Geoff Coats

There would be a slight difference in data if your system were free floating, a dock-less system versus a station based system versus a hybrid system. So in New Orleans, we have a hybrid system. It was intentionally designed that way and it's always worked that way. And what this means is we have stations. We put them out and for point to point riding, if you ride your bike and you park it in a station, then you are only charged the cost of the trip. You are then also allowed to park outside of the stations. If you want to park closer to your house or something, you can lock the bike up to any public bike rack or street furniture, and then there is a $2 convenience fee for that privilege. Right? So we're trying to encourage people to use the stations, but you don't have to. So the reason I bring this up is I think that in terms of data, one of the things that we can look at are bike share hubs that are co-located with transit stops. What's the ridership like there? Are we seeing any sort of uptick? What would be really great to see, and this is where I think it could get really interesting, is if we can get that sort of backend integration where we could see if we can give, let's say, a free 15 minute ride to anyone who has ridden on a bus. And if we can use the same sort of maybe QR code scanning or whatever tech the buses are using and the bikes are using, tap to rent or whatever, then we could really start to see an integration. How many people are taking both that bus trip and a bike trip? And I think that would start to be interesting data. So we are looking at our side of it, but we also understand that we have these big gaps too. Right? We can see rides that happen next to a transfer station for the RTA, but we really don't know if somebody walked across the street and just got a bike and rode it or if they came in on the bus and then rode it. We're missing that piece of the data. So I think that would be an interesting partnership to try and figure out.

Patrick Urbine

What we were able to do early on was to identify the need for data collection in order to have a data driven approach to community engagement and outreach. So we created a unique transportation equity research project and partnered with a masters of public health student at Tulane University's Graduate School of Public Health. And from there we created a unique project that really did a deep dive into different neighborhoods within the Blue Bike existing service area. And we had a survey that collected information about the respondent's general demographic similar to what you would find on a census form. And then from there asked specific questions about different barriers to access as well as different facilitators to access. And through that process that really informed the need for our community liaison program. So taking a look at the data that we were able to collect and then not just having data for data's purpose, but then implementing that data to have a strategic outreach plan has been really integral to how our organization functions. Tothis day we continue to have a really awesome relationship with our various partners. So as Geoff mentioned, some of our most integral partners to being able to relaunch as a nonprofit is our title sponsor, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana, as well as our partnership with the City of New Orleans and the Mayor's Office of Resiliency and Sustainability. They have been very helpful with our permitting process for expanding physical Blue Bike station infrastructure. And then we also have our general nonprofit and community partners. So as a nonprofit, there is a tendency to recognize that we're all working to address these large systemic issues. And there's so many different aspects to how do you improve transportation access, and really trying to be able to understand the totality of that, but at the same time, really focusing on what your organization's core mission is. And for us, it's providing equitable bike share to residents and visitors of New Orleans, point period. That's what we do. At the same time, we can still work in partnership with other organizations and to form coalitions to help advocate for the expansion of infrastructure that may make it easier for folks to access bike share, to help in coalition to potentially provide advice for how can we create a more sustainable, more affordable, larger community. We're not in the business of building new housing, but that's still something that we can work on as a coalition. And one of the coalitions that Blue Krewe has been integral on is the New Orleans Complete Streets Coalition. it's a group of for-profit, nonprofit, and education institutions that are advocating for the expansion of Complete Streets as well as for the City of New Orleans to stay true to the Complete Streets ordinance that the city formally passed. all of that is really important to be able to continue to collect data and to continuously come back to that data with fresh eyes and to think about how we're able to utilize that data for intentional community outreach as well as intentional partnership building.

Geoff Coats

I would say too, the one big difference that I have noted going from the for-profit model into now the nonprofit model, one of the challenges with the for-profit model that we encountered here was a lack of trust between the providers and cities over data. And a lot of wrangling about whose data it is and what data you can see and what data you can't see. And one of the goals in building this new Blue Krewe community run bike share was as a nonprofit, we were able to provide seats on our board to the city. And so essentially being able to say, look, you're going to see from the inside exactly the same data that we are seeing and that you have confidence that we're not trying to hide the data. We're not trying to tell you something that's not true. And what's been really nice about that, the one partner we haven't really talked about yet is Drop Mobility, which is our partner who provides the hardware and software that runs the system, and they've been a fantastic partner to us and with them and the city now we can all say, what data do we need to see that's helpful? And it's interesting because a lot of times I think cities assume that we have data and we're just not sharing it, but the reality may be that we actually don't have a way to measure that, or we can't see that data yet, or we haven't thought to ask for that data yet. And so now we can come together. We are the client and partner with Drop. So if we ask them to help us gather this certain dataset and the city is part of our governance structure, then we can all come together and either we have the data or we don't, or we find an approximation for it, but it has really reduced a lot of the friction that previously I think was there just because people, assuming somebody else had a different agenda, which may or may not have been the case.

Andrew Carpenter

Related to that is I think a lot of times there are a lot of, it's easy for people to say like, oh, well why don't they just get this and that'll fix whatever challenge this is that I have with using the transit system or the bike share system. But are there any types of technology that you are hoping to implement for your operations to address some of those challenges that people have brought to your attention?

Geoff Coats

One thing that we have discussed is the tap to unlock technology would help us with the challenge right now of having to have a cell phone, which can be a barrier to certain populations. So there's certain technology pieces. I come from a background of previously of user experience and whether that's online or in the real world, I'm constantly looking at how can we use technology? How can we use hardware development to just create a better experience? How do we make it easier for people to lock and unlock the bikes? How do we reduce the number of friction points that people feel when they go to check out a bike share bike? So I think there's a lot of fronts we can look at and try to improve. And it's a young industry. I think people forget that. And it is still iterating at a rapid pace. And that's the exciting part about it.

Patrick Urbine

We currently have an electric system, and something that has been exciting to explore is how can we use renewables to power the bike share system in New Orleans? So if that means putting solar panels onto a warehouse and closing that energy loop, or if we're able to really focus on expanding our operations fleet so that way it's minimizing the need for an EV van and really maximizing an operations vehicle fleet of retrofitted e-bikes and kind of having a low carbon impact way to run the system sustainably.

Geoff Coats

One of the pivots we haven't really talked about, but this was part of our initial relaunch strategy, which was when we were run previously, we had five, six vans running constantly to service the system. And one of the things that we did when we came back was like, how few vans can we have? And so when we launched, we only leased one van, which we weren't sure if we could pull that off or not, but as Patrick mentioned, what we started to do was to use the actual bike share bikes and pulling trailers for battery swapping and for safety checks and for vehicle maintenance out in the field. And we've taken our learnings over the last couple years, and we've added to that. We've changed the design of our trailers to make them more effective. We have added a coaster cycle that is a battery swapping vehicle, which is an e-trike, and we've added another coaster cycle e-trike, which has been built out as a mobile mechanic platform and of something that can rebalance three bikes at a time, move them from place to place. Up to this point, we've managed to get by with only having one gas powered van, as opposed to having five or six that we used to have. Each piece we're like, okay, now how far can we push it? What if we get two more of these mobile mechanic e-trikes? What if we get two more of the battery swappers. Right? And how do we design our system so that we can effectively use this fleet and minimize our footprint.

Erich Lange

Wow. That's really cool. That's innovation at its finest really. So you're constantly kind of tweaking your operation and seeing where you can gain some efficiencies. What does the rest of this year have in store?

Geoff Coats

So one of the ways that I think about bike share, which is not scientific by any means, and I'm sure other people would have other opinions, but is that, you know, you have things like sort of small bike shares, 50, 75 bikes, and they can operate with a certain model. Right? It doesn't have to scale massively because there's just not as much to do. Then you get into a few hundred bikes and then you can get into a mid-sized system, maybe you're up over 500, 600, pushing up to a thousand. And then you get into sort of large scale systems up above 1,000, 2,000, 3,000. And what we are trying to learn over the next year as we sort of push into this mid to large system size is what do we need to learn to do better? When can we just do more of what we're doing now and at what point do we need to flip a switch and start to do something differently? When does that economy hit us? And so we're taking our steps that way to continue to serve more and more New Orleanians and to be as reliable as we can be. You know, if public transit isn't reliable, people don't rely on it. And so we're trying to take our steps to continue to grow and serve the community as best we can.

Patrick Urbine

The most important thing with Blue Bike is being able to continue to show up and to do the work in a way that's reliable for the community to really ensure that Blue Bikes is something that folks can integrate into their daily use, and they know that the product is going to function well. ~~And~~ in terms of community engagement and outreach, that we're continuing to show up in community as a supportive partner and being able to provide channels of communication that allow for folks to be able to provide feedback, and for us as an organization, as a community run bike share, to really be able to utilize that information in order to build a stronger program for the future.

Erich Lange

There's kind of two segments here of your market, obviously mostly locals, but a big part of that is also visitors. What would your suggestion be for someone who's new to New Orleans grabbing a bike, or also maybe a local who hasn't ridden a bike yet. Where should they grab a bike and go for the day?

Geoff Coats

So one of the things that I like about bike share, and especially this touches on the Lafitte Greenway that Pat mentioned earlier is, it's a great way to get out of the core of the downtown city or the French Quarter, which it's where your hotels might be, where the convention center is, where the French Quarter is, which is all great, but if you want to come and experience sort of like how New Orleanians live in the neighborhoods, you can grab a bike by Armstrong Park and you can take a ride up the Lafitte Greenway, which as Patrick mentioned as this sort of rails to trails conversion. And it comes right up through a bunch of neighborhoods up the heart of the city into mid-city New Orleans. And there's different places that you can stop, different neighborhoods you can check out. You could drop off the Greenway and go to Dooky Chase's to get some food. You can keep coming all the way up to sort of Carrollton area to get some food, get some Italian ice cream from Brocato's. You can stop along the Greenway at Parkway and grab Po Boys and some gumbo. There's a lot of great stuff to see and experience and just sort of take off of the Greenway and just pedal into one of the neighborhoods like Bayou St. John or along the Bayou St. John, which is a waterway that connects out to the lake. And I think it just gives people a different flavor of New Orleans, of what it's like outside of that sort of downtown zone.

Patrick Urbine

Building off of Geoff's recommendation, big Greenway fan myself, love Bayou St. John. And if you just continue in the city park, you're going to be able to access a bunch of awesome museums. The New Orleans Museum of Art is in there as well as the botanical gardens. There's a beautiful sculpture garden and the Children's Museum is all back there. So highly recommend hopping onto the bike and cruising through city park, enjoying the live oaks and the Spanish moss and pedaling around.

Andrew Carpenter

Thank you both for joining us today and we're excited to just show how bike share is a core part of a mobility network and all the cool technology that goes into making it work on its own and then how it helps integrate it into a bigger transit system. So thank you both.

Geoff Coats

Oh. Thank you for inviting us. This was great. Really fun.

Patrick Urbine

Yeah. Thanks so much you all.