

CITY OF BOSTON LAUNCHES ECO-FRIENDLY BIKE DELIVERY PILOT

A program using e-cargo bikes for food delivery is set to soft-launch this summer, city officials say



Rows upon rows of double-parked vehicles with hazard lights flashing clog the streets of Allston. Supply trucks idle at curbs outside local markets and pharmacies, belching smoke from their exhaust pipes. Buses and cyclists wait impatiently behind them or weave in and out of traffic to get around them.

The presence of these delivery vehicles creates a host of traffic and safety issues along with concerns over pollution from rampant tailpipe emissions. Ben Hellerstein, the state director of Environment Massachusetts, says that Massachusetts' transportation system is the state's single largest contributor to climate change.

"We're still getting the vast majority of the energy that we use from dirty fossil fuels. It's a major source of harmful pollution that is linked to a wide range of health problems like asthma, cardiovascular disease, stroke, and birth defects," says Hellerstein. "There's a tremendous amount of urgency in moving our transportation system to clean sources of power as quickly as possible."

This summer, the City of Boston is moving towards this goal by launching a pilot program that will use e-cargo bikes as delivery vehicles. Led by program manager Harper Mills, the pilot will attempt to kick-start a new mode of delivery to mitigate emissions concerns.

“Especially since the pandemic, we have been seeing that delivery vehicles are a significant contributor to congestion and subsequent pollution in the neighborhood,” says Mills. “Boston's streets in particular are not designed to accommodate large vehicles or the kind of volume and frequency that we're seeing.”

With this program, Boston is getting into the delivery business, and has received a grant of nearly \$500,000 from Massachusetts Clean Energy Center and the Department of Energy Resources. These funds will be used to hire a company to provide a fleet of delivery bikes and manage the program's day-to-day operations. Grant funds will also cover the cost of delivery for participating shops, restaurants, independent pharmacies, and small grocery stores. Mills and her team have been working for more than a year to develop a proposal for outside e-bike vendors and garner interest from local businesses.

The program will use e-cargo bikes, which feature compact, powerful electric motors that assist the movement of the pedals and reduce the burden of carrying heavy loads. They can transport goods ranging from



takeout containers to boxes of pharmacy supplies, depending on their construction and cargo capabilities. While the electric motor and battery won't last as long as a gasoline-powered engine before needing a charge, e-bikes are markedly better for the environment in terms of fossil fuel emissions.

“I think that this e-bike pilot is exactly the kind of thing that we should be doing. It's aiming to get trucks off of our streets and to deliver goods in a way that is much lower impact,” says Hellerstein.

One of Mills' first major decisions was what Boston locale would be the pilot program's ground zero.

“We chose Allston as a focus neighborhood because it is an environmental justice community. There are communities in Allston that face disproportionately negative environmental-based impacts,” says Mills. “By cutting down on the amount of vehicles, we're cutting down on greenhouse gas emissions, and hopefully we'll be able to see a decrease in the pollution that is emitted to the air in this in this neighborhood.”



Mills has been working with Allston Village Main Streets, an organization dedicated to supporting small businesses in Allston and promoting environmentally-friendly initiatives. Its executive director, Alex Cornacchini, acts as the go-between for Mills and local business owners.

"I do a lot of work with local businesses, so I know them on a personal basis," says Cornacchini. "It's a lot easier for Harper from the city to discuss this idea with a business owner if they know that Allston Village Main Streets is also in support of it."

Mills and Cornacchini say responses from local businesses have been generally positive. As they try to determine which sectors the service could best benefit, they have had conversations with an eclectic range of storefronts, from restaurants like Korean-fusion joint OliToki, clothing stores like Vivant Vintage, and mom-and-pop grocery stores like Russian market Bazaar, to occult shop Ritual Arts, liquor store Blanchards, and local tattoo shops Stingray and Regeneration Tattoo.

"Our conversations now are about planting the seed and trying to generate interest but also learning from businesses about their operations and how the service could fit into what they're already doing," says Mills.

According to Cornacchini, many Allston restaurants are interested in seeing if the pilot program could offer an alternative to delivery services such as UberEATS and DoorDash, but on-demand takeout delivery is not likely to be its main focus.

"We're not necessarily trying to compete with [delivery apps]. Our goal isn't to run UberEATS out of business—that would be impossible—but our goal really is to encourage the use of this type of vehicle," says Mills.

Cornacchini adds, "So far, the city doesn't think that [on-demand, takeout food delivery] is going to be very possible. But generally, [businesses] have been very supportive of the idea as a concept, specifically because it would help mitigate traffic, it's environmentally friendly, and most importantly, it's a free service for the businesses."



Vivant Vintage is one local outfit who has been particularly interested in the program, Cornacchini says. Located in lower Allston, Vivant Vintage provides an example of what the e-bike delivery pilot could offer beyond another takeout service. Their online store, which features the same treasure trove of retro threads and quirky antiques as its in-person counterpart, currently offers delivery through UPS. Instead, local customers could order their 1980s racecar-print Hawaiian shirts and vintage koala-shaped belt buckles through the e-cargo bike pilot program, allowing both buyer and seller to avoid the hefty cost of delivery fees.

While Mills and the Department of Transportation believe the program is best suited for these kinds of scheduled deliveries, which could also include catering services for restaurants and supply deliveries to smaller, independent markets and pharmacies, they haven't completely ruled out more familiar takeout delivery services.

"Whether or not a customer will actually be able to request the service themselves versus just having the business decide which types of items get delivered using the service--it could be one or the other. It could be a mix of both. It depends on who the operator is. That's an important question that we're still flushing out," says Mills.

Currently, the program's leaders are looking for a contractor to determine the day-to-day logistics of the pilot. This will include everything from the types of cargo bikes used to the kind of delivery services the program will provide to businesses. Mills and her team have just submitted a request for proposal to e-bike vendors, so the next step is to wait and see who bites. This means that Allston residents looking for a cheaper, greener alternative to UberEats are not completely out of luck, but will have to cross their fingers and hope the selected vendor will choose a program model that flattens delivery costs for their weekly La Mamma pizza delivery.

As the program's projected kick-off this August draws nearer, Hellerstein hopes that the e-cargo bike pilot will demonstrate that clean-energy alternatives to transportation and delivery services are possible.

"This is something that would need to be scaled up many times over in order to actually have the kind of impact that we need," says Hellerstein. "But hopefully it can demonstrate that it is feasible, and that for every one of these e-bikes that's deployed, it's reducing our emissions by this much, it's cleaning up our air by this much, and that you can kind of paint a picture of what this would look like if it really happened at scale."

For his part, Cornacchini hopes the pilot will have a positive impact on local business owners.

"I hope to see it continue. I think it's a great idea. It's never been done in Boston before, and it seems like Allston is such a dense neighborhood that it could support this program. I'd just like to see it be a successful program, and I'd like to see businesses sign up and be successful through it because that's really who we're trying to benefit through this," says Cornacchini.

After the 18-month program ends, there will be an evaluation process where Mills and her team work with Metropolitan Area Planning Council to examine the program's functionality and impacts. From there, they will establish a framework to expand the pilot to other neighborhoods across the greater Boston area.

"This kind of status quo of having these massive truck rumbling through our streets belching pollution is not ideal. We're not going to be done until every gas car is replaced with electric vehicles," says Hellerstein. "I think we have to do these things and then show that it works and then expand it out pretty quickly, because every day that we're continuing with the status quo is just another day where we're changing our climate and putting this really dangerous pollution into our air."