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'Operational costs' vanquish city, university's e-bike program

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One of the new Wheels e-bikes is ridden around the Western Kentucky University campus on Wednesday, Sept. 7, 2022. (Grace Ramey/gramey@bgdailynews.com)

Grace Ramey

Western Kentucky University and downtown Bowling Green's electric bike service has come to an abrupt end.

Prior to this week, Wheels Labs Inc. e-bikes could be found lined up in racks from Fountain Row all the way up to campus. Riders could take them for a spin for 29 cents per minute through the company's app, and a GPS field kept bikes within an approved area of town.

As of Monday, the bikes have been removed.

Jace Lux, WKU's director of media relations, said the company informed the university last week that it would be ceasing bike operations in Bowling Green.

"They cited operational costs as the reason," Lux said.

NYC-based company Helbiz acquired Wheels Labs Inc. in a merger in November.

"That happened not long after they arrived on campus," Lux said. "Wheels was still a division of Helbiz and so most of the year, they were already under that parent company, so it wasn't like that was a terribly new development."

Helbiz announced in January it would be "discontinuing operations in non-profitable or cash-positive markets by spring 2023." It later announced a rebrand to Micromobility.com Inc. on March 30.

Lux said there had been no indication a termination was coming.

"Pretty big surprise to us. The feedback from the campus community was that they were well-received," Lux said. "I think they had a regular group of students that used them and benefited from them so we were pretty surprised."

The Daily News reached out to Helbiz for comment Monday afternoon but has not received a response.

The city came to an agreement with the university last September to allow the bikes to be used around downtown as a way to bring the two locations together.



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“It’s unfortunate. We were seeing really good results,” said Telia Butler, the city’s downtown development coordinator.

Butler said she notified city officials of the program’s termination, who also said it was unfortunate.

“We thought it was going well. We had good overall positive feedback from it from the community side and the campus side,” she said.

Butler said the city was told Bowling Green and WKU’s launch was “the most success they had had in any other college town so far.”

This is not the first time WKU has lost transportation services.

VeoRide offered bike and e-bike access at WKU from 2018 to early 2020 until the company removed its vehicles from campus.

Before this, students were able to take advantage of the Big Red Bikes program, which repurposed donated bikes for student use from 2007-18.

Butler said the city would be happy to work with other bike companies in the future if they offered a similar program.

“We did have a little conversation with WKU Parking and Transportation after we got the news. If there are similar vendors out there that may be a good fit, we would certainly be open to that,” she said.

Lux said the university will be exploring options for providing a similar service later down the line.

“I would imagine that those conversations will start this summer, and it’d be great to have a replacement here on campus by the start of the fall semester,” Lux said. “But we’re certainly going to do our due diligence to make sure that we’re going with a company that can meet our needs and has a solid reputation.”

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