Capitol Hill staff will soon be able to cruise the Mall on slick new emissions-free sets of wheels -- eco-friendly bicycles.

The Wheels4Wellness program will allow House employees to borrow bicycles from racks situated on the Hill, where they can use them for short day trips like exercise or running errands.

The initiative was spearheaded by Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.) and organized by House Chief Administrative Officer Dan Beard.

Blumenauer is the founder of the Congressional Bike Caucus, a bicycling advocacy group that has almost 200 members. He bikes to work every day and hopes the new fleet of bicycles will allow his colleagues to similarly enjoy "the most efficient form of urban transportation."

"Burning calories instead of gasoline makes a lot of sense," Blumenauer said. "I've calculated that I've burned over 100,000 calories since I've been here in Washington," he added.

The exact details of the program, including the number of bikes and their locations, have yet to be ironed out. Beard's office has said it plans to wheel the bikes out by May 21, the start of National Bike to Work Week.

Washington bike enthusiasts are happy to see another bicycling program roll into their city.

"We're really excited that the House is taking this on," said Eric Gilliland, executive director of the Washington Area Bicyclist Association.

Biking is an "ideal mode for short trips," Gilliland said, because starting a car's ignition does the most environmental damage. Even if congressional staff members are just biking across the campus, he hopes it will promote a culture of biking.

Jeff Ventura, director of communications at Beard's office, acknowledged that the emissions-savings of a 30-bike fleet would be small, but he said it might change the way people think.

"We would love it if we could sort of change the culture of this place to the point where people want to ride to work every day," Ventura said.
Two-wheelers catching on

The trend has caught on as companies try to improve health and lower traffic congestion. Other businesses in the area have attempted to change their employee culture by setting up successful bike-to-work programs.

Honest Tea, a beverage company in Bethesda, Md., gave each of its 50 employees a Jamis bicycle last year.

"Why contribute to greater congestion in the area and carbon emissions when biking can be part of the way to reduce that?" asked Dale Crowell, director of public relations for Honest Tea.

Some companies have bicycling clubs for their employees to ride together, said Douglas Franklin, marketing specialist with the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, who works with businesses to develop bike-to-work programs.

According to Franklin, bicycling to work is popular because "it's a cheap method of transportation and it's certainly clean for the environment."

Washington hopes to develop its own bike-sharing program. The city has partnered with Clear Channel Outdoor to develop SmartBike D.C., which is expected to begin at the end of May. Riders will be able to pay a yearly fee that will allow them to borrow bikes from designated racks around the city, said Jim Sebastian, pedestrian and bicycle coordinator for the city's transportation department.

Bicycling enthusiasts hope that the program will create an even stronger bicycling culture in Washington.

The city now has 30 miles of bike lanes, 27 of which were built within the past six years, said Sebastian.

"We do better than most other big cities," Sebastian said.

According to a 2005 Census survey, 1.7 percent of Washington residents biked to work as their primary means of transportation. D.C. ranked seventh nationwide in terms of the percentage of those who biked to work.

Portland, Ore. -- Blumenauer's home -- ranked No. 1. If his home city can foster a strong bicycling culture, Washington certainly can, Blumenauer said. "It rains all the time in Portland."