

Bike Pittsburgh seeks converts among commuters

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By Kaitlynn Riely, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Earlier this week, Klaus Bellon realized he was whistling happily to himself on his way to work.

Mr. Bellon, 31, became a bike-to-work commuter this week, switching from his usual commute that required driving to catch the T and then taking a bus to get from his Mt. Lebanon home to his job as a designer at the Software Engineering Institute at Carnegie Mellon University.

"It's really the exact same amount of time as my old commute," Mr. Bellon said. Both commutes take about 55 minutes, but only on his bike commute can Mr. Bellon ride quiet trails in Panther Hollow.

Bike Pittsburgh is trying to get more people to trade their car for a bike or other car-alternative when commuting. Mr. Bellon was in Schenley Plaza in Oakland on Friday morning for the launch of Car-Free Fridays, a Bike Pittsburgh initiative also supported by groups like the Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership, Port Authority and the City of Pittsburgh government.

Commuters, many of them clad in bike shorts and helmets, stopped by Schenley Plaza to get free coffee and breakfast, pick up biking maps of Pittsburgh, learn how to use bus bike racks and get tune-ups for their bikes. Bike riders also could show their helmets and receive a free breakfast Downtown at Fifth Avenue Place.

Lou Fineberg, of Bike Pittsburgh, said he hopes Fridays will become "the day to look forward to not driving to work." He and other speakers at the event encouraged Pittsburgh commuters to travel to work without cars on other days as well.

Since the beginning of the year, Tom Walker, 57, has driven to his job at Mullen Pittsburgh only two times. The rest of the time, he either bikes or paddles a kayak. Mr. Walker has been using bike and kayak alternatives to driving for 18 years.

Except in very cold winter months, he kayaks at least once a week from his home in Millvale along the Allegheny River to Mullen Pittsburgh's offices in The Crane Building. He can make the river trip in 23 minutes, Mr. Walker said, but he usually takes longer so he can enjoy the river in the morning.

"Once you start it and become addicted to it, it just becomes part of what you do," he said.

Scott Bricker, executive director of Bike Pittsburgh, said he thinks more people are starting to bike to work here.

"Seven years ago, I knew everyone on a bike on the street, but now I see new people all the time," he said.

According to numbers from the American Community Survey, conducted in 2007, 1.1 percent of Pittsburgh area residents commute to work on bikes, which places Pittsburgh as No. 11 in the country in terms of bike commuters, he said.

There are some negative stereotypes about biking in Pittsburgh due to the hills, weather, narrow streets and winding roads, Mr. Bricker said.

"I think that also makes it a fun city to ride overall," he said.

Bike Pittsburgh is trying to attract people to the concept of biking to work by giving out bike maps of the city and organizing bike pools so people can ride together to work.

A bike pool is how Mr. Bellon discovered the bike-friendly route to his office. The 14.5-mile ride is easier than he thought it would be, he said, so he intends to keep up his new commute.

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