

Commuters turn to bikes

Workers pedal to save on cost of fuel, improve their fitness

It isn't just the price of a gallon of gasoline nudging Laurie Lee, 48, of Marietta, to dust off her trusty old bicycle and pull it out of her garage on Sixth Street to pedal to work in North Hills.

"I used to ride my bike to work all the time, but have gotten away from it," Lee said. "I'm a little lazy. It's all uphill. I have been thinking seriously about it lately and may just go ahead and do it."

It's National Ride Your Bike to Work Week and more people than ever before are thinking about riding a bike to save on the cost of fuel and for fitness.

"Bikes are back," said Drew Smithberger, president of the River Valley Mountain Bike Association, an affiliate of the International Mountain Bike Association. "I am noticing more kids riding bikes and more people riding to work. The benefits are great."

Smithberger said safer routes for bicycle riders are needed in Marietta, along with more "connectors" with the River Trail to schools, businesses, libraries and other recreational facilities. Because Marietta is a small town, roads and access are safer than many cities, but improvements would help, he said.

"When new roads are built, like Route 7, there is no reason a bike lane could not be built at the same time," he said.

Smithberger used to ride to work, but his job now requires him to drive a company vehicle. He saves his riding for weekends.

"The average person loses 13 pounds a year commuting to work on a bike," he said, quoting statistics he's read. "And the U.S. could save 462 million gallons of gasoline annually if the number of riders (to work) increased from 1 percent to 1.5 percent of the population."

Cycling—for fun, fitness and transportation—is a growing interest in Marietta, Smithberger said.



MITCH CASEY The Marietta Times
Fred Smith, Director of the Physical Plant at Marietta College, rides his bike along Warren Street Monday. Smith frequently foregoes an automobile in favor of a bicycle when commuting to work.

“I wouldn’t hesitate a moment except that the helmet thing is an issue (hair), and I work in an office setting and need to dress professionally. That really isn’t conducive to riding a bike to work,” Laurie Lee said.

But fuel costs are beginning to change her mind.

“Why fight the gasoline prices?” she said. “I did have a couple bad incidents with motorists when I was riding a bike to work and some sidewalks are difficult to navigate. (But) I’m a rider, in general, and I think it keeps me very healthy.”

Before recent health issues kept him off his bicycle, John Bolen, better known as Cobbler John, rode about a mile to work in downtown Marietta every day. It was not uncommon for people along Front, Second or Third streets to see him riding back and forth on his vintage bike.

For more than five years, Bolen pedaled to work and home again, mostly year-round.

“I kind of miss it,” he said Monday. “I liked to smell the flowers and look at people’s gardens along the way. It was hassle-free with no parking problems.”

The downtown merchant remembers once paying \$25 a month for parking.

“If you have a kickstand, you’re good,” Bolen said of parking his bike. “What got me started is that I didn’t have access to a car. I’d hit the sidewalk—it was so much slower paced.

“Health-wise, riding a bike gets the juices flowing,” he said.

Bolen, 60, said the best route from his house was down Front Street because there was less traffic. He would ride every day unless it was bitter cold.

“Some people are real bike enthusiasts, real serious about it, but I was just using my bike as transportation,” Bolen said.

“With these (current) gas prices, everybody’s getting interested but as soon as prices come down again, people will be back to their SUVs,” he said. “We had gas lines in 1972 and in the early 1990s. The problem keeps coming back as we continue to burn fossil fuels.”

He predicts today’s problem will stick around.

“You’ll never see gas prices down again,” Bolen said.

If you decide to ride a bike to work, this veteran rider says consider a basket on the front or saddle bags.

“Mine was an old-time bike. I would run errands with it and pick up things after work,” he said. “You need a basket to carry things.”

Fred Smith, director of the physical plant at Marietta College, has been riding a bike from his home on Warren Street to the college, most every day since he started working there in 1999. It's a ride that covers about three city blocks, he said.

"Marietta is a very bike-friendly town," Smith said. "The traffic speed is relatively slow; motorists pay attention to riders. I ride to work because it is a convenient and fast way to get here. I can leave my car at home."

Marietta College encourages students to ride bicycles, and McCoy Hall has an interior room where bikes can be stored out of the weather. There are bike racks throughout the campus area, Smith said.

The main drawback of riding a bike to work is weather, he said.

"I'll walk with an umbrella when the weather is bad," Smith said.

Riding a bike to lunch is a special pleasure for David Haas, with Morrison Inc. of Marietta. His goal is fitness and recreation, not transportation and fuel savings. He is an avid mountain biker and member of River Valley Mountain Bike Association.

"I live out County House Lane and consider Ohio 26 too dangerous to ride to work every day. I leave my bike at work," Haas said. "I like to squeeze in a little fitness at lunch. You can cover so much ground on a bike, much more than walking."