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HEALTH

DETROIT'S FIRST BIKE TO WORK DAY COMING: Motor City commute without the motor

Riders say cycling keeps them fit, clears minds

May 15, 2006

BY CECILIA OLECK
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

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Most days, 24-year-old Michelle Knepel, an accountant for General Motors, wakes up, goes for a run, readies herself for work -- then tucks her pants into her socks and hops on her blue Schwinn bicycle for the 2-mile commute from her home in Detroit's Corktown.



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Ten minutes later, she's pulling into a parking structure near the Renaissance Center, her blood pumping and her mind ready for work.

Michelle Knepel of Detroit, on her way to work at General Motors in the RenCen this week, says her 10-minute commute beats the construction and traffic jams she endured when she lived in Troy. Others are expected to join her Friday as part of Bike to Work Day. (DAVID P. GILKEY/Detroit Free Press)

On Friday, cyclists like Knepel will be out in force to mark National Bike to Work Day, an event meant to connect people who already bike to work and to get more people interested in the option. And with high gas prices and big waistlines in metro Detroit, supporters say now is a good time to try it.

National leaders are giving the idea a nudge, too. A bill that would give tax benefits to employers who offer cash

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READY TO RIDE? KEEP THESE THINGS IN MIND

Safety: Wear a helmet. If riding at night or in bad weather, add high visibility clothing -- think reflectors.

Road rules: Obey traffic signals and signs like you would if you were driving.

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reimbursements to employees who bike to work was introduced in the U.S. Senate last month; a similar bill is in the House.

"We're trying to get people to realize that if you live within 10 to 15 minutes of work, this is a great thing to do, it's a healthy thing to do, it's a social thing to do," Alex Froehlich said earlier this month. The 24-year-old Detroiters heads Detroit Bikes! and is organizing the group's first Bike to Work Day event from Royal Oak to Campus Martius on Friday.

Recreation and peace of mind

Riding to work is not a new concept. But in Michigan, where biking has traditionally been seen as a recreational activity, the interest in making the area more cyclist-friendly seems to be growing.

For example:

The League of American Bicyclists awarded \$1,000 earlier this year to the Mid-Michigan Environmental Action Council in Lansing to promote its Bike to Work week program called Smart Commute '06.

The league also recognized Ann Arbor as a bike-friendly community this year.

Bicycling magazine has chosen Detroit as one of 11 cities across the country to participate in a bike-giveaway program called BikeTown 2006. The program promotes biking as an alternative form of transportation.

Bike lanes are added to new road-improvement projects in Washtenaw County, which now has about 60 miles of bike lanes on county roads.

Ferndale added about 3 1/2 miles of bike lanes last year and is working to create a route map for cyclists.

Rich Moeller, executive director

Parking: Finding conveniently located bike racks can be tricky. Some parking structures may have them. Also, check with your boss to see whether there's a place inside the building to secure bikes if outside racks aren't available.

How you'll smell: Drive to work once a week to leave appropriate clothes at the office. Smaller items such as deodorant and a towel can be carried in a backpack while riding. Some businesses have a place to shower or are near a health club that does.

You can bus it: If you live too far from work or don't think you're ready to bike the entire distance, take a bus -- many are equipped with bike racks -- for part of the way.

Source: Free Press research, League of Michigan Bicyclists Web Site, www.lmb.org

FIRST DETROIT BIKES! TO WORK DAY

What: People who work in Detroit will cycle to work together to promote Bike to Work Day.

When: Friday.

Starting point: Royal Oak Farmer's Market, 316 E. Eleven Mile, at 6:15 a.m.

Route: Woodward south. There will be stops to pick up and drop off cyclists in Ferndale, the Michigan State Fairgrounds, Highland Park, New Center and the cultural/medical center.

Ending point: Campus Martius, downtown Detroit, at 8:15 a.m.

Return from: Campus Martius at 5:30 p.m. Route is Woodward north to the farmer's market.

To learn more:
www.detroitenergy.org

of the Lansing-based League of Michigan Bicyclists, said about 18% of his group's 2,000 members say they regularly bike to work, and 24% said they sometimes do.

He said his rides to and from work -- about 6 1/2 miles each way -- help him stay fit and achieve peace of mind.

"When you ride to and from work, you get rid of that frustration and stress that you have," he said last week. "I can tell you my car ride home is very frustrating. My bike ride home is very relaxing. Plus, it's 50 minutes of exercise a day that I'm not taking extra time away from my family."

WHAT'S THE ADVANTAGE?

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Amount of money saved on gas annually if you bike 15 miles to work three days a week between April and September, based on a car that averages 28 m.p.g. and is filled up at \$2.80 a gallon.

635

The number of calories a person weighing 140 pounds would burn during a 15-mile, 1-hour ride

Source: Free Press research,
www.fueleconomy.gov,
www.caloriesperhour.com

Places such as Traverse City and Ann Arbor have had organized bike-to-work events for years, Moeller said.

Bike-to-work events are also popular in several cities across the nation, with established events in San Francisco, Baltimore and Alexandria, Va., among others.

In Detroit, rides have been organized on a small scale. Froehlich said that he hopes this Friday's first Detroit Bikes! ride-to-work event will become an annual tradition that grows throughout the region.

He said he's expecting about 100 people, based on the number of participants on recent bike tours of downtown Detroit.

"We know that it happens -- people bike to work every day in Detroit," Froehlich said. "We hope that those people will show up and help us make a bigger awareness of it."

Perks for those who ride

For Knepel, the 10-minute ride has its perks.

After riding a bike as her main source of transportation in college at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Knepel said she found herself hating the long drive from where she used to live in Troy to downtown Detroit. She moved into the city nearly two years ago and started biking at the start of the year.

She said she saves time by not having to park her car (although she still must park and lock her bike at a parking structure), she gets to spend time outdoors and she doesn't have to deal with traffic jams or construction.

Plus, the ride helps her feel more alert.

"It's kind of a way to prepare yourself for the day," she said. "It gets your heart rate up."

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