

The Birmingham News

Gas prices prompt some to become pedal pushers

Wednesday, July 02, 2008

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Every morning, 36-year-old Shawn Carroll rides his Ridley road bicycle the 12 miles from his home in Birmingham's Eastwood neighborhood to his workplace off Colonnade Parkway near the junction of U.S. 280 and Interstate 459.

For Carroll, the motive is personal, not economic. He simply enjoys the ride, although he'll admit he's glad it's one less car on the road.

A majority of metro residents have not been affected enough by rising transportation costs to travel to work as Carroll does. But many local bicycle shops say they are seeing more and more people taking the first steps in that direction.

"We're definitely doing more repairs," said Mike Fisher, one of the owners of the Birmingham Bicycle Company located in eastern Birmingham. While he speaks, Wayne Kenamer stands in the back of the shop tinkering with the gears on a partially dismantled bicycle, with another cycle beside him waiting to be repaired.

"Gas just has to be more expensive to fuel people to commute this way," Fisher said.

Roger Byrd, the owner of Bob's Bikes, said he, too, is seeing a substantial increase not necessarily in bicycle sales, but rather in repairs.

"We see people bring in their old bikes in because they want to give riding another try now," Byrd said. "But it's every day we have someone in here talking about changing how they commute to work."

Byrd said he has also noticed another change within the last year. Byrd believes nearly 30 percent of the customers visiting his shops in Homewood and Vestavia Hills are new to the idea of bicycle commuting.

"Now, it's so broad. It was definitely a male, 25- to 45-year-old target audience, but now it's anywhere from 60-year-old women coming in to kids who want bikes to ride to school," Byrd said.

Accessories necessary for bicycle commuters, like locks and helmets, have been in demand, Byrd said.

Jonathan Robbins, a manager of Cahaba Cycles in Cahaba Heights, said his staff has noticed an increase in potential bicycle commuters who have pulled old bicycles out of the garage to be repaired.

"The talk of \$5 for a gallon of gas is the tipping point for most people. I hear it at least once or twice a day, but for now, people are just asking about (commuting)," Robbins said.

All three men agree that in comparison to some cities in Wisconsin or Texas, which have embraced the bicycle commuting lifestyle, metro area cities such as Birmingham need major improvements to make bicycle commuting accessible to more people.

"The city would really have to invest a lot of money into its infrastructure to make it work here," Fisher said. "The reality for most people is that it's difficult to commute this way in Birmingham just because of

the way the city was built."

But for those who want to try bicycle commuting, the Birmingham Bicycle Company, 1105 Dunston Ave., offers classes every Monday night at 5:30 for beginners new to road riding.

Maintenance classes are also available to anyone new who is interested in learning how to care for a bicycle.

"I would love to see more people commute this way," Kennamer said as he wiped chain lube off his hands. "You talk about a jump-start to your day... it just makes you a different person. It's a very positive thing."

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