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Rising gas prices give bicycle sales a boost

Commuting on 2 wheels saves money, environment

*By Minhaj Hassan
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Since gasoline prices started skyrocketing in the spring and passed \$4 a gallon this summer, more people are exploring or rediscovering bicycling for commuting.

Marty Epstein, owner of Marty's Reliable Cycle, which has stores in Morristown, Hackettstown and Randolph, said he "absolutely" has seen an increase in bike sales, particularly in commuter bikes and so-called hybrids, a combination of a mountain bike and a road bike.

"I've seen it for sure," he said in a telephone interview. "There is definitely a lot of interest."

Epstein said most of the customers are rediscovering bicycling not only to save a few dollars on gasoline, but also because it helps the environment by not emitting exhaust fumes.

"They tell me they would like to go to Kings (supermarket on South Street in Morristown) without having to drive every time," he said. "They don't want to use their cars for every errand."

Sales are up 15 percent to 20 percent, he said. He estimated he has made about 50 to 100 additional bicycles sales each month. By the end of this year, he expects to sell an extra 1,000 bicycles among all three stores.

The most popular bicycle for commuting purposes, Epstein said, is an internal-hub, eight-speed commuter bike made by Breezer. The price is between \$1,000 and \$1,100. Another popular bicycle is the 21-speed Trek Soho, which costs between \$700 and \$1,100.

Occasionally, Epstein said he will get a customer who buys a folding bike, such as the ones manufactured by Dahon. Individuals who use mass transit may find those useful, he said.

Chet Hunt of Whippany Cycle said he also has seen an increase in commuter and hybrid bikes sales. He estimated about a 10 percent to 15 percent jump in business. He said the store sells about 1,500 bicycles a year.

Whippany Cycle has been encouraging people to take up cycling to better cope in a slow economy.

"Times are tight, ride a bike," its Web site reads.

Fixer-uppers

Hunt said he also has seen an increase in the number of bike repairs as well. Repairs include brake replacements, wheel balancing and installation of new cables and tires. Repairs generally

range between \$50 and \$200.

Hunt said the store experienced a brief problem with obtaining enough tires for older bikes. He said many bikes that are brought in for repairs are from the late 1970s and early 1980s, when 27-inch wheels were very common. Tires of that size are no longer in demand as they were back then. Equipment suppliers ordered more, but the delay created some backups that have since been resolved, he said.

At Whippany Cycle, commuter bikes generally sell for between \$500 and \$700 and hybrid cycles start at about \$350, Hunt said.

Both shop owners also said sales of supplies such as baskets, bags and other equipment have risen as well, but no detailed figures are available.

Fred Clements, executive director of the National Bicycle Dealers Association, which has main offices in California, said there has been an increase in the category of "nonenthusiasts," individuals who use bicycles for commuting or utilitarian purposes.

"We are seeing a whole different type of customer, largely those who want to reduce dependence on motor vehicles," he said. "It's a nice development."

Clements said hybrid bicycles primarily are used for utilitarian purposes, and sales for those have steadily increased over the years.

In 2004, they made up 12.5 percent of sales. In 2007, the last year in which completed results were available, that figure rose to a 16.5 percent share of the number of bicycles sold.

There are approximately 4,200 independent bike retailers, Clements said. That number does not include department stores that sell bicycles.

While Clements said it's good news that there is an increase in commuter bikes, there is a potential downside, in that "we may lose out in (sales in) the recreation and enthusiast markets."

But, Clements said that probably has more to do with a sluggish national economy than them being replaced by the commuter market. "It's good news if people use (bicycles) for utility purpose," he said. "They can be a great connector for short commutes. I'm for anything that makes people take bicycles more seriously and not just look at them as toys."
