

Wheels turning to promote cycling

Those who believe cycling is an economic benefit to the area range from city planners to bicycle shop owners to biking enthusiasts. As the numbers of people riding the Withlacoochee State Trail continues to grow, plans are being formulated to capitalize on appeal of Citrus County as a bicyclist's destination.



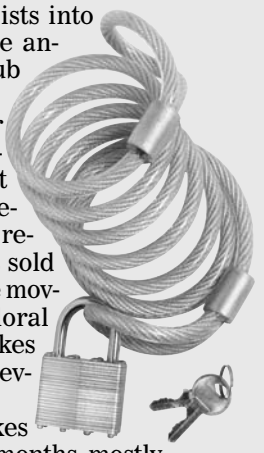
City of Inverness staff members, downtown merchants, city council representatives and community members gather outside of the Deco Café on Courthouse Square recently to unveil a new bicycle parking area. The city will designate one parking space near the café solely for bicycle parking.

By the numbers:

The annual Rails to Trails bike ride on the state trail brings as many as 1,600 cyclists into the area, and the Clean Air ride another 1,000. The Citrus Cycling Club has about 80 members.

Of the bikes purchased last year and this year from Suncoast Bicycles, about 90 percent were bought by Citrus County residents. Between 15 and 25 percent were recumbent bikes. Most of the bikes sold by Hampton's Edge Bicycles since moving to its trailside location in Floral City from Istachatta have been trikes and recumbents, which can cost several thousand dollars.

Wade said he rents about 50 bikes a month, more during the winter months, mostly to European tourists and Dutch residents of Lakeside Country Club on U.S. 41 in Inverness.



Map it, Citrus:

One of the proposed projects to help promote bicycle tourism is a map of designated bicycle trails. Hernando County recently produced such a map, with a grant from the Florida Department of Transportation.

Citrus County's Tourism Development Council (TDC) is currently in the process of applying for a grant so Citrus County can have its own map.

"That's just another marketing piece to put in people's hands," said Marla Chancy, TDC director. "Right now we're identifying paved trails with facilities, bike lanes on streets and potential/future trails."

Chancy said the TDC's Web site, www.visitcitrus.com, also spotlights biking as an activity in Citrus County.



Marla Chancy

Beyond biking:

For Chris Lloyd, the time is ideal for Citrus County. "As baby boomers are retiring, they're asking themselves, 'Where should I live?' They're more active than generations before them," he said, "and I can see folks coming to Citrus County because it's a bicycle-friendly environment."

At 46 miles long, the Withlacoochee State Trail is the longest trail in Florida, and people come from other states and other countries just to ride it.

As Ken Koch pointed out, most people who are cyclists are generally also into other sports. They also kayak, swim and boat, hike, ride horses; they want to go see the manatees — and whether they visit or move here, they spend money.



Chris Lloyd

Bikes a boon to business:

While the obvious businesses to benefit from an influx of cyclists are the local bike shops, that's not all. Bikers get hungry and thirsty. They want a place to sleep at night and someplace to get an ice cream cone or a cold beer.

The city of Inverness purchased bicycle racks, which are scattered throughout the city. One parking spot outside the Deco Café in downtown Inverness is now designated bicycle parking, complete with a bicycle rack. There's also a bike rack in front of the Ice Cream Doctor on Pine Avenue.

Inverness City Manager Frank DiGiovanni said 10 bicycles can fit in one car space, which will benefit local busi-

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Terri Adkisson
 general manager, Central Motel in Inverness.

nesses because bike riders shop, too.

One local business that's seen a boost from bicycle traffic is the Central Motel in Inverness.

"There's a huge community of organized bicyclists that travel long distances to come here and ride," said Terri Adkisson, the motel's general manager. "Word is catching on. We've got groups that come back year after year."

One group, from Englewood, has stayed at the motel for the past seven years and has 40 rooms already booked for next year.

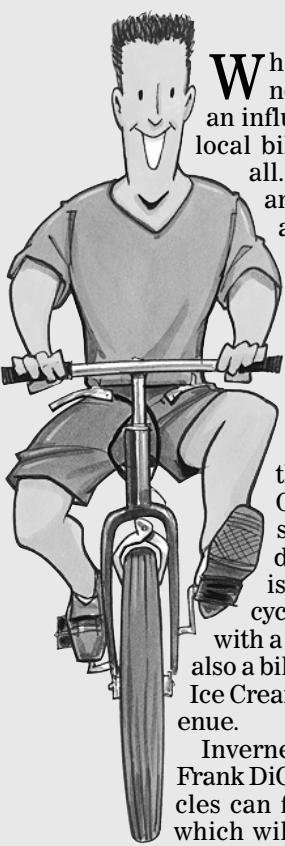
The motel has a secured stor-

age area for bikes.

"Even with the economy the way it is, we had as many if not more stay with us last year," she said.

Two bicycle tour businesses, Bicycle Savannah and Senior Cycling, include the Central Motel as part of their package to Citrus County. Adkisson said she has included e-mailing to bike clubs as part of her active marketing to bicyclists.

"The trail sells itself and is a huge asset to this county," she said. "We're lucky to be (located) mid-way on the trail."



Where to bike? West side story:

Although the trail is the main attraction for bicycle riders, it's not the only place to ride. Whispering Pines Park in Inverness is open to bicycle traffic. Still in the planning stage is a mountain bike trail at the north end of the park, which will draw a completely different category of riders into the area.

Running along the south side of County Road 486 is a designated bike path, said Jim McLean, a member of Citrus Cycling Club.

He said it's possible to ride from one



end of the county to the other using C.R. 486, State Road 44 and U.S. 19, which all have bike lanes.

One of the keys is educating car owners to share the road, however.

Another place to ride on the west side of the county is the Withlacoochee Bay Trail, near Inglis. It begins at the Felburn Park Trailhead and heads toward the Gulf of Mexico.

The westernmost 2.5 miles of paved trail runs through maritime hammocks and salt marsh.

<p>■ WHAT: 2009 Citrus County Cycling Classic.</p> <p>■ WHEN: 7 to 8:30 a.m. Saturday, July 18.</p> <p>■ WHERE: Rails to Trails Inverness trailhead.</p> <p>■ COST: \$25 by July 10; \$30 after July 10.</p> <p>■ INFORMATION: www.citruscycling.org; 341-3910.</p>	 
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—Nancy Kennedy

Inverness Bicycle Master Plan:

With a \$50,000 grant from the Florida Department of Transportation, the City of Inverness has embarked on developing a Bicycle Master Plan, to kick off in June, with Kimley-Horn and Associates from Tallahassee as the consultants.

The ultimate goal is to have Inverness designated a Bicycle-Friendly Community by the League of American Bicyclists. Currently, there are only four such places in Florida: Boca Raton, Gainesville, Orlando and St. Petersburg.

Simply put, the Bicycle Master Plan involves implementing projects throughout the city that will make bicycling easier. Such projects include

painting bicycling symbols on existing bike lanes, such as on State Road 44, and/or posting signs. It may mean adding separate bike paths on roads, possibly installing bike lockers and building shower facilities for people who bike to work.

"We've been doing our downtown redevelopment for some time, and part of that was to link downtown to the parks," said Ken Koch, director of development services for the city of Inverness. "We've tried to make the downtown area pedestrian-friendly, so we said maybe with this linkage it should be multi-modal."

Koch said Inverness is uniquely situated with

the Withlacoochee State Trail running directly through the area, connecting, not only the downtown area and the parks, but residential areas, the hospital, several schools, shopping centers and even an industrial park.

"For the most part, people around here ride for recreation," Koch said. "We want to make it convenient for them to use their bikes for everything."

