CAMDEN COUNTY BIKE SHARE PROGRAM GETS ITS WHEELS (Via Courier Post)

(April 28, 2014) - Thirty refurbished bikes of all types were available earlier this month for the launch of the East Camden Bike Share program.

Of those, 26 went out the door of the city’s Baldwin’s Run Community Center to happy cyclists, for little more than a nominal fee or a promise to volunteer.

“I was worried there were not going to be enough bikes,” said Esther Mercado Pits, who coordinates the program in East Camden.

The neighborhood was the initial location for bike sharing spearheaded by Camden County, said Jack Sworaski, director of the county’s Division of Environmental Affairs.

A similar program exists in Collingswood.

“We’re trying to take it county-wide,” Sworaski noted. “There’s already a waiting list in East Camden.

“More people want bikes than we have to give out.”

But more are on the way. The bikes come from donations by residents and bike shops and from inventory of stolen bicycles recovered by the police.

Volunteers in Blackwood repair and upgrade the bikes. Eton Bicycle Shop in Cherry Hill offered a break on tools and parts.

The county expects to open a satellite repair shop in Cherry Hill to assist with the repairs.

After some research, Pits met with community leaders and saw bike sharing as a part of the city’s overall involvement in the rails-to-trails program. It focuses on 25 miles of trails within Camden that connect to Philadelphia via the Ben Franklin Bridge.

Collingswood charges $25 for a one-year membership in its bike-sharing program, which allows people to use bikes for a day, a week or an entire year. Membership includes free repairs.

East Camden also has a $25 membership fee. And a family of bikers pays just $10 a year per additional bike after the initial fee.

In lieu of money, bike sharers can volunteer time to the program. Bikes come with helmets. Parents have to sign a pledge ensuring helmet use and a promise not to leave the bike unattended.

But a stolen bike will be replaced for free, Pits said. On June 7, the neighborhood will celebrate the East Camden Bike Share program at Baldwin's Run and Scotland Park. Participants will receive free locks at that time.

Officials are not worried about members stealing the bikes.

“The membership fee is more than the value of the bike,” Sworaski explained.

And there are positives: Old bicycles get back in service and citizens who take them get some exercise. Or they are a means of transportation for those without cars.

“We want residents to get out on bikes for exercise and enjoyment,” said Freeholder Jeffrey Nash, a longtime bike rider who has participated in the MS150 City to Shore, an annual charity ride from Cherry Hill to Ocean City, among other events.

“I know what it means for health and recreation. Not everybody can afford a bike. We wanted to make them available for everyone.”

The county also provided 25 bikes in the fall to the Parkside Bike Share program. But its coordinators took a
different approach, Sworaski said.

“They are holding the bikes to coordinate group rides and other bike-related events to build interest in their neighborhood,” he added, “and to assure that children who want to participate have the ability to do so.”

Pennington and Gloucester Township have expressed interest in participating in the bike sharing program as well.

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