

Bike to Work Week has health benefits

By Juan Villa

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Bike to Work Week has arrived in Visalia.

Starting today with Bike with Mayor Amy Shuklian, locals will take to the streets on their bikes to participate in numerous events organized throughout the week.

"Most folks, when they talk about cycling they make up problems and don't do it," said Bruce Mackey of Hanford, a League Cycling Instructor with the League of American Bicyclist. "Studies show that 30 to 45 minutes of exercise gets the blood flowing. It has good mental effects. There's nothing like getting to work after a bike ride all charged up with the brain firing on all cylinders."

Mackey rode his bike to work for years in the District of Columbia, Nevada and Florida.

The league offers the course Commuting, a course for adult cyclists who are thinking about commuting to work or school.

The course discusses topics like route selection, bicycle choice, dealing with cargo and clothing and foul weather riding. More information on the class can be found on their website at www.bikeleague.org.

"I'd recommend they take the class, which will address all the questions and concerns they might have," he said. "People just get scared. They're caught in inertia and afraid of **change** but this kind of change can be so good for you. You can lose pounds, clear your head, it will give you more oxygen and you'll get really fired up and get more ideas. There aren't a lot of distractions on bike rides."

Locals who ride their bikes to work describe how they started and their experiences:

Not only does Herb Simmons save money every day by riding his bike to work, he's also making money because of it.

For nearly 15 years, the Provost & Pritchard Consulting Group principal engineer from Visalia has received \$2 a day from the company for riding his bike to work.

"Originally, I did it for exercise and also to save money and for air quality reasons," he said. "The reason I continued to do it was because it's something I just really enjoy, it's a lifestyle thing now. To be able to leave your house and ride your bike to work is a very pleasant and enjoyable lifestyle."

It's now been nearly 20 years since Simmons began riding his bike to work 15 to 20 times every month. It began in Fresno where it was a 21-mile roundtrip to work, it was cut to six miles nine years ago after being transferred to Visalia. To drive those six miles in his company car it takes about 12 minutes, just three minutes less than it does if he rides his bike.

"I'm never tired from it," he said. "The only reason I drive to work is if I need the car that day for field work or meetings."

Simmons said Provost & Pritchard has been very helpful when it comes to making sure employees that ride their bikes to work have what they need to complete their tasks, like providing a company car when needed and adding showers to their Visalia location.

Because of the showers, Simmons is able to ride hard in the morning, when needed, for exercise then simply change at work.

"When the weather is nice I just wear my work clothes. I don't wear a suit very often. Sometimes I wear slacks and a button shirt and I'd ride in that, too," he said. "Once it gets hot, I'll ride in shorts and a T-shirt and change in the **office**."

Simmons isn't the only one to change.

In the time he's been riding in Visalia, he's noticed a change in the drivers around town.

"Drivers are mostly pretty good," he said. "It's gotten better in recent years. When I first moved down here, I had some incidents."

Simmons credits the city of Visalia for making huge strides on **improving** bicycle facilities around town to hopefully get more people to ride their bikes to work.

"It takes effort but a lot of it is just mindset. It's getting out of the mindset that you're dependent on cars," he said. "In Visalia you can get anywhere in town in five miles, it's very rare that your ride will be more than five miles. It's flat and the weather is largely nice."

Simmons has gained more than a few extra bucks in his wallet every month by riding his bike to work.

"It's made me healthier and I do it for enjoyment," he said. "Sometimes it's the best part of my day, riding to and from work."

Just START

Nani Rowland has been riding her bike to work since taking her first job after graduating from Whittier College in 1980, even though that job was 27 miles away.

Rowland, now a project coordinator with the Tulare County Office of Education, lived in Long Beach and worked in El Monte at the time.

"I've always been very health conscious. As a registered dietitian, I know the importance of personal commitment to being active," she said. "More so than that, here and in Southern California it's almost as fast to ride your bike than to get on the freeway system."

The week would begin with Rowland taking her bike and car on Monday and riding back home on the bike. The car would typically stay at the office until Friday. The ride would take Rowland about an hour and a half, the more she did it the faster she got.

"This has replaced the gym. I used to pay my membership and fight for equipment but this is my exercise now," she said. "It's also my alone time. Time to plan my day on way to work and, after work, it's my time to unwind. I'm a much better person when I get to work because I feel good, energized and all stuff that."

With time to think during her commute Tuesday, Rowland came up with START, an acronym to help those considering riding their bike to work.

- Safe: Be mindful of safe riding techniques. "You need to be safe by having the right gear, following the rules of the road and just being smart about riding."
- Together: "Together we can make a difference in our environment by using alternative transportation."
- Attainable: Be realistic about how far and when you can ride. "For people just starting to ride their bike, make sure it's an attainable goal. Plan your commute. Are you going to need your car? Do you have a backpack? Is your bike in good condition? Maybe even take your car to a certain location and ride from there."
- Route: Map out your riding path to work and use routes. "Try five or six different routes to work. If you don't like the traffic on one, take another."
- Transportation: "My bike is my transportation. My Danish grandfather would tell me that they didn't have cars, trains or mass transit so they rode their bikes everywhere. It was their mode of transportation. When I run errands I use my bike. We should have the mindset that it's alternative transportation, everyone thinks they need to have their own car."

For Bike to Work Week, Rowland has convinced five co-workers to meet every morning and ride their bikes to work.

"I convinced them to ride next week and that's a success," she said. "It's three miles with five of us that work with school health programs. What better people to be modeling health than these people?"

Rowland hopes it continues after this week.

Weather permitting

When the weather began to warmup last week, Orlando Gomez dusted off his bike and began riding to work.

As a night shift driver for Golden State Overnight, Gomez typically leaves his Goshen home just after midnight.

"I started again this week but I've done it on and off for three years, it just kind of depends on the weather," he said. "I did it for my personal health, for the cardio aspect, but I also go to the gym everyday. Plus, I save some money because of gas prices."

The 3-mile ride is usually done in 15 minutes at a steady pace. Occasionally, Gomez will pick up the pace and build up a little sweat.

"I just get a little towel for my head. I'm the only one in the truck so if it happens to smell a bit it's OK," he joked. "It's a good little workout."

The ride doesn't have many obstacles, but because Gomez leaves Goshen just after midnight, some streets have to be avoided.

"I don't really have problems with the drivers," he said. "But I do have to avoid the dogs in Goshen at night."