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Bike to Work Day: Encouraging bicycle commuting reaps rewards

By George Gill



Thirty-six-year-old Todd Severance, of Leesburg, stands with his road bike on the W&OD Trail at South King Street in Leesburg; he often passes here on his way to or from work at Wyle Laboratories in Crystal City.

"Bike to Work Day is my favorite day of the year," said Rick Fleeter, president and chief executive officer of AeroAstro in Ashburn. Fleeter bikes to and from work daily from his home 15 miles away in Reston.

"I commute about 150 miles a week," he said. There are occasional days when he doesn't come into the office, often riding his bike downtown for meetings.

Fleeter said he finds commuting to work via the Washington and Old Dominion Trail an efficient way to get exercise and a non-aggravating way to get to and from work.

"There's no traffic, it's cheap, and very enjoyable," he said. "We have this bike path that's just wonderful, as opposed to spending your life on Route 7 or the Greenway. You see deer and rabbits -- it's like you've died and gone to heaven. I've always wondered why more people wouldn't do it."

Fleeter believes he's making a difference by biking to work. "I decided a long time ago you really can't change other people -- but you can at least act that way yourself," he said. "Maybe one or two other people might be inspired by you, and say, 'Hey I can do that,' even if it's just one day a week. Biking to work is not just stomping up and down and saying, 'We ought to save gas or do this,' it's demonstrating the individual can participate in helping solve some important problems."

Fleeter said employers can help encourage people to bike to work by providing some basic storage areas or racks for bikes, biking equipment and clothing. Installing a shower for people who have longer bike commutes helps a lot, he said, and usually doesn't take up much more room than a single restroom stall.

He said perhaps the simplest accommodation would be to relax workplace dress codes so some people don't have to worry about bringing an extra sport coat and tie or riding while dressed in a business suit. "If I were an employer and I'm going to encourage people to bike to work, that's the first thing I would do."

Fleeter said people new to the idea of biking to work might want to first set modest goals.

"Another thing people can do to make it easy is, don't do it every day," he said. "Do it on the day when the weather is nice and it fits your schedule. I'm a hard-core biker and do it every day regardless, but there's no reason you have to do that. I think if people would just concentrate on trying to do it maybe once or twice a week, more people could do it."

Fleeter said one other person at AeroAstro rides almost every day and several ride one to three times a week.

He organized two annual "bike day" events, where employees go bicycling after work together to get ice cream. Fleeter makes sure to pick up the tab. "The deal is people ride their bikes to work in the morning, and then we ride out for ice cream on the way home," he added.

Leesburg resident Todd Severance boasts experience riding his bike to work in Arlington and, more recently, from work back to Leesburg - a full 40 miles.

"Last year I'd drive to work with my bicycle in my trunk," Severance recalled. "I would bike home. Then early next morning I'd bike to work and then drive home."

He and his family live in the northwestern part of Leesburg. His commute takes him to Wyle Laboratories in the Crystal City area.

This past year, he changed plans so that he usually bikes home from work four days a week on the W & OD Trail.

"This year I have a carpool buddy," he explained. "What we're doing is we're alternating our individual cars so my bike's always in the trunk. Then I'll bike home. That'll be about 40 miles, from Leesburg to Crystal City."

Severance said he has biked for about 20 years. "This is a way to save gasoline, and to get my workout in," he said.

The W&OD Trail is great for such long bike commutes to or from work, he said.

"It's been really smooth," he said. "You're not exposed to traffic at all on the trail. I come home just tired, instead of tired and angry because of traffic."

Severance said having a good road bike and a comfortable seat prove helpful on lengthy bicycle commutes.

"I would also say, you just have to be prepared for any sort of weather," he said. "I have standard short sleeves and shorts. I've got a long sleeve version for if it's cold, rain gear, and obviously -- always wear a helmet."

He also recommended people whose commute requires them to bike at night make sure they wear something that makes them clearly visible on the road.

"Along the W&OD Trail, 40 miles, I'll go for speed and try to break a personal record," he said. "For me, it's not just recreational -- I'm definitely trying to hit certain mile-per-hour averages. I bike it so much I know when I hit certain landmarks how I'm doing and what my time will be like getting home."

While 40 miles may sound like a long journey, he has trained for 100-mile bike rides. Last year that included the Ride for the Roses, a cycling event that raises funds for the Lance Armstrong Foundation; the 111-mile Tour de Tucson by Perimeter Bicycling Association of America, which benefits nonprofit charitable agencies; and the Reston Century bike event.

Cathy Compton, a senior program manager with the fitness wellness program at AOL, is among the contractors who run AOL's fitness centers and wellness programs.

She said AOL began establishing its own on-campus pit stops for company employees as part of Bike to Work Day about five years ago.

Along with providing refreshments, Compton said the AOL employees' pit stop will raffle off a bike in addition to the three raffled by the non-AOL pit stops. "We are partnering with Spokes Etc. in Ashburn," she said. "They've worked with us to get a bike as a raffle and cut us a great deal."

She said Spokes Etc. will also come on the AOL campus that day and do safety checks, bike checks and mini-seminars about biking.

Compton said AOL has quite a few employees who like to bike to work, in part because of the company's relatively close proximity to the W&OD Trail.

"There are bike racks in every building and garage at AOL, and they're packed," she said.

The Pedal Shop in Ashburn has sold bikes at a volume discount to a number of area businesses and agencies, both in Loudoun and in other counties, that encourage their employees to ride. One customer is Wetland Studies and Solutions Inc., which purchased bikes from the Pedal Shop at a volume discount for employees to use near its offices in Gainesville. The company is a water, natural and cultural resources consultant.

John Critchfield, a civil engineer at the company, said Wetland Studies and Solutions President Michael Rolband, wanted to encourage employees to bike to the nearby Virginia Gateway Shopping Center for lunch and exercise. He said the company put in a trail behind the office leading to the shopping center, so employees wouldn't have to ride their bikes on a crowded street.

He said to encourage employees to use the bikes, they put in locker rooms and showers in the building, along with exterior bike racks.

Critchfield said that most of the area there lacks the infrastructure for employees to safely bike to work, but there is some hope new sidewalks will be installed as new housing goes into the area.