

Ocean City promotes biking the boards to and from school

By MICHAEL MILLER, Staff Writer, Posted: Thursday, May 14, 2009



Parents, volunteers and teachers take a caravan of bike-riding students Wednesday from Ocean City Intermediate School to their bus stops to promote a healthy lifestyle and ward off childhood obesity.

OCEAN CITY - Getting around the resort can be a lesson in traffic congestion.

But Thomas Heist was surprised by how fast it was to bicycle from the Gardens to the Intermediate School on 18th Street.

The Ocean City parent chaperoned a group of students Wednesday on a "riding school bus" in which volunteers take children on a convoy of bicycles to and from school.

The idea is to get students more active, art teacher Judy Dickens said. She lives in Egg Harbor Township but pedaled her bicycle on the Boardwalk with her students.

"The first goal is to encourage physical fitness. The second is to go green and ride a bike, which is more environmentally friendly," she said. "And the last goal is to teach bicycle safety."

About 50 children participated Wednesday, wearing helmets and hopping aboard their bicycles when the last bell rang. Several parents and teachers served as escorts.

"Today was great because we saw dolphins jumping in the water from the Boardwalk," Heist said. "Where else can you see that while bicycling to school?"

The city is trying to make life easier for bicyclists. The city dedicated a shared route on Haven Avenue last year with a reduced 15 mph speed limit and copious stop signs that discourage drivers from using this north-south route.

The city also eased a Boardwalk restriction to let students ride their bikes home on the wooden way in the afternoon. Typically, police enforce a strict bicycling ban here after noon.

Drew Fasy, chairman of a city Physical Fitness Committee, spearheaded the Riding School Bus and volunteered as an escort.

"It is designed to help ward off childhood obesity and promote a healthy lifestyle," he said.

His group plans to host a similar event in September. Ideally, students will continue to ride their bikes to school in coming weeks, he said.

Ocean City's streets empty out for more than half of the year, making it a breeze for bicyclists. But in the busy summer, the mix of cars and bikes on the narrow roads can be harrowing for drivers and bicyclists alike.

Unlike some districts, Ocean City's schools provide courtesy busing for students the length of the island. Students have the choice of riding the bus or their own bike, Fasy said.

Heist said he thinks most students can navigate the island's streets safely on bike.

"I used to bicycle to school when I was a kid," he said. "You think it's a long ride from the Gardens, but it only took us 15 minutes."