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Bike path to link Ocean City, Atlantic County

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(Published: January 9, 2008)

OCEAN CITY - Haven Avenue will live up to its name for bicyclists this spring.

The city is turning this north-south road into a biking route from Ninth to 34th streets so people can get around town more safely.

"This is an absolute movement to get people on bikes," said Drew Fasy, chairman of Mayor Sal Perillo's advisory council on physical fitness.

The city will reduce the speed limit on Haven Avenue from 25 to 15 mph and add stop signs that will discourage motorists from using this road to travel north or south.

The avenue will connect eventually to the new Route 52 causeway's proposed bicycle path, which will be contiguous with the Somers Point bicycle path that stretches all the way to Mays Landing.

Business Administrator James Rutala said Haven Avenue was chosen because it fronts schools, the transportation center, the Aquatic and Fitness Center and the public library.

"Our next phase of this project is to look at ways to connect the base of the causeway to Haven Avenue on Ninth Street," Rutala said. "Then bicyclists can use this to get downtown or connect to the bicycle system in Atlantic County."

Fasy said residents at a public meeting on the proposal expressed universal support for the plan.

"I think it's a great idea," Haven Avenue resident Wilma Murray said.

Murray, 74, said she regularly rides her bicycle to the Boardwalk in the summer. Getting around town by bicycle can be tricky with all the traffic, she said.

"I haven't had any close calls. But you definitely have to pay attention to what the other person is doing," she said.

Ocean City is following a national trend toward adding bike-friendly routes, Fasy said.

"We're not reinventing the wheel here," he said. "We're following the lead of a lot of big cities. New York is adding 250 miles of bike lanes in the next three years."

Fasy said he expects more residents in midtown Ocean City will ride bicycles downtown to restaurants or stores in the summer to avoid parking congestion. The city likely will need more bike racks to accommodate the riders, he said.

"We're working on that, too, to add 1,000 bike parking spots in town. They don't have enough,"

he said.

Fasy said he hopes this route will persuade more children to ride their bicycles to school. This 15 or 20 minutes of exercise each morning and afternoon would go a long way toward heading off childhood obesity, he said.

"Linwood has hundreds of bikes at their schools," Fasy said. "Given the opportunity, I think we will, too. We want them off the bus. We want them exercising. We want them on their bikes."

Judging by a 2007 study by researcher Sarah Martin, this could be a tough sell. Her study, sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found that fewer than half of American students ages 9 to 15 who live within a mile of their school walk or ride their bicycle to class even one day per week.

"We have a culture where children would rather sit in front of the TV than exercise," Fasy said. "We're hoping to impact that. Getting kids to ride their bikes to school would make a huge impact."

The designated route will be ready by May 1. Fasy said the city will promote the route in the annual tourism guide.

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