

Cascade encourages two-wheeled commuters



Cyclist Josh Putnam, far left, talks with Cascade Bicycle Club staff at the Lid Park on Friday, July 10.
Elizabeth Celms/Mercer Island Reporter

By [ELIZABETH CELMS](#)
Mercer Island Reporter City Reporter
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John Mauro stands along the I-90 bike trail at the Lid Park, encouraging cyclists as they pump over the crest of a winding hill. The cyclists wave back or nod, between breaths, as they continue their way east from the I-90 bridge. Others pull over to greet Mauro, who stands behind a table cluttered with healthy snacks, biking pamphlets, maps and stickers.

“Help yourself to a bagel and juice,” Mauro says, passing a jar of peanut butter to a panting cyclist.

The station is part of a joint project between the Cascade Bicycle Club and Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT) to encourage bike commuting over the I-90 bridge during this month’s construction.

The Bridging with Bikes program, as it is called, celebrated its fourth Friday at Lid Park on July 10. The group was there on three Fridays during the May bridge closure and will continue for two more Fridays in July.

Last Friday, four members of Cascade arrived at the Island station at 5:45 a.m. They commuted from Seattle by bike. Staff member Stephanie Frans came all the way from North Seattle, hauling behind her a trailer heavy with a collapsible table, Cascade Bicycle Club flags, stacks of Seattle bike maps, safety guides and WSDOT construction schedules, along with a backpack filled with bagels, bananas and juice for morning cyclists. Other items were carried over from a house on Mercer Island.

The team’s station was ready to go by 6 a.m., just as the morning’s first cyclists began buzzing past on their way to work.

WSDOT estimates that anywhere between 1,500 and 2,000 cyclists commute across the I-90 bridge per day now that the westbound lanes are closed for construction. When all lanes are open, the bridge usually sees 1,000 bikers per day, Mauro said.

With I-90 traffic slowed to a near standstill during rush hour, commuting cyclists can't help but feel a bit smug flying past the idling cars on their bikes.

Pacific resident Josh Putnam, who works at Farmers Insurance Group on Mercer Island, was one cyclist who stopped to snack at the Cascade bike station.

"It's totally backed up down there," he said, motioning to the Homer Hadley I-90 bridge behind him. "We're passing all the cars. It actually feels pretty good."

The time was a few minutes shy of 9 a.m. The morning rush hour, exacerbated by the bridge's expansion-joint construction project, was at a full peak. Putnam, meanwhile, still had time before work to enjoy a fresh bagel in the early morning sun.

"It's just beautiful out today," he said. "Perfect for biking."

Commuting all the way from Pacific, which is just south of Tukwila, Putnam takes both train and bike. It's a commute he has been doing for months — not just during this summer's I-90 construction.

"I take the train from Tukwila to King Street Station in Seattle. Then I ride my bike over the bridge. The train takes half an hour and the bike ride takes 20 minutes," Putnam explained.

The cyclist is a perfect example of what Cascade Bicycle Club is trying to encourage: not just I-90 construction bike commuters, but also regular commuters.

"We want to enhance cycling as a viable and reliable way over the bridge," Mauro said. "We're trying to make it easy for people to join the biking community — not just during construction, but for the long-term."

In addition to cheering on cyclists and passing out helpful bike commute and WSDOT bridge closure information, the Cascade members offer free bike commuting classes and "bike pilots," cyclists who have volunteered to help guide new commuters through the city to their places of work, if needed. Seattle resident Dominique Blachon was Friday's bike pilot. He had no takers that sunny July morning, but will show up another Friday in case a novice commuter needs his guidance.

The Cascade Bicycle Club will return to the Lid this Friday, from 6 to 9 a.m., with fresh bagels waiting.

For more information on the Bridging with Bikes Program, visit: www.cascade.org.

Mercer Island Reporter City Reporter Elizabeth Celms can be reached at ecelms@mi-reporter.com or (206) 232-1215.