

Challenge accepted

Simsbury cyclists rode more than 100,000 miles this summer

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SIMSBURY – Summer heralds in all sorts of activities: swimming, vacationing and camping. And for a number of people, it has become the season of cycling thanks to the Simsbury Bicycle Pedestrian Advisory Committee and Simsbury Free Bike.

For the third year, the groups have organized the Simsbury Bike Challenge, a local challenge that is part of the National Bike Challenge, a free nationwide advocacy and wellness program that works to encourage people to bike for transportation, fitness and recreation.

The local challenge kicked, or rode, off May 1 and ran through Sept. 30.

All total, 101 local riders registered and logged

101,412 miles. Simsbury Challenge participants came in 27 out of 710 groups that participated in the national program. Due to changes made at the national level this year, the size of teams was reorganized, and Simsbury fell into a different category. Last year it ranked first for the community size.

“I think we still did really well,” said Debbie Thibodeau, a member of the Simsbury Bicycle-Pedestrian Advisory Committee. “Our top riders were riding over 5,000 miles. They were putting in 100 days of riding in five months. There is definitely some passion there in the community. We were very pleased with participation this year.”

Each year the process to register changes, and this summer participants had

the option to use the Strava app to record their miles.

The total mileage for this year was down slightly. In 2016, riders logged about 104,000 miles and Thibodeau attributed the slight decrease to the app. Many may have been turned off by having to log their information online.

“It was a two-part sign-up process, and everyone is not crazy about fitness apps. That seemed to be a barrier for us,” she said.

During the challenge wrap-up party, held Oct. 10, Thibodeau said prizes were given out to the top three women and top three men finishers, thanks to prizes donated by local businesses.

“It’s an opportunity to get everyone together,” Thibodeau said of the gathering.

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While participants are responsible for getting on their bikes and logging the miles, they can enjoy the company of their fellow riders at the challenge's kick-off event in the spring and through other get-togethers and group rides held throughout the summer.

"Our goal with the challenge we host, it as an advocacy initiative. It's co-hosted by Simsbury Free Bike, our local bike share and advocacy group," Thibodeau said. "We see the challenge as an opportunity to encourage biking, which is obviously good for people's health, gets some people off the road and using their bikes and not their cars.

We know the biking community is very strong in Simsbury. It's a strong identity for Simsbury. It's good for bringing business into town, bringing in tourism into town. Real estate is probably affected. It brings a lot of good things to Simsbury."

The Challenge is also an opportunity for the advisory group to collect data, which can be used to make biking in town better and safer.

Thibodeau has been a part of the bike advocacy groups in town since 2012 and has noticed that this summer, particularly, she saw more people out and about on their bikes regardless of the day of the week.

She also said that schools have noticed an increase in the number of students who are biking to school.

For several years now, some schools in town have hosted a Walk/Bike to School event that is part of the Safe Routes to School initiative. Recently, Tootin' Hills, Squadron Line and Latimer Lane schools held events in which students, many accompanied by their parents, rode their bikes or walked to school.

"I think it's great to introduce kids and, through them, their whole family, you can use your bike for transportation," Thibodeau said.

Additionally, as the children get older, they, too, can take advantage of the many trails and bike routes in town.

"My daughter bikes to and from soccer practice. I don't have to drive her both ways," Thibodeau said.

While the season has brought cooler temperatures to the area, there is still time to get out and enjoy biking in town.

"Fall is a great time to bike. It's really beautiful, the temperatures are more comfortable. The biking season has not stopped," Thibodeau said.

For those in town who may not have participated in the challenge or may not have tried biking in town, Thibodeau encourages them to dust off their bicycles and



Enjoying all the cycling Simsbury has to offer were the top three female finishers from the 2017 Simsbury Bike Challenge; Cathy Grandahl, #3, Joanna Toothaker, #2; and the top female finisher, Patty Sawyer.

get on out there. Even those who may no longer have a bike, they can use one from Simsbury Free Bike. Those 18 and over can find a free bike at several locations in town. Simply leave your license with the local sponsoring business, take a ride using one of the bikes available, and the license will be returned when the bike is.

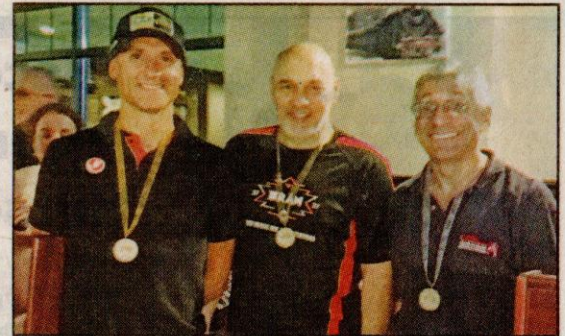
Additionally, not all biking has to be done on busy streets. There are several paved trails in town to bike on including the Farmington Canal Heritage Trail, which

runs north to south, and the Farmington River Trail, which is an east-west route to Canton.

For those feeling more comfortable, there are narrow routes through town, too.

Thibodeau explained there are classes offered for those new to cycling, which can cover bicycle safety and other important skills.

For anyone out there, Thibodeau strongly encourages cyclists to wear a helmet. Although the state law requires only those 16 and



Courtesy photos

Gathering for a post-challenge celebration are the top male finishers from the Simsbury Bike Challenge; Chris Brits, #3, Gary Scarcella, #1, and Joseph Anastasio, #2.

under to have a helmet, it is a worthy investment regardless of age. As Thibodeau said, she had a cycling friend who wiped out due to a squirrel and he was riding on a local trail. Also, a rear view mirror can be beneficial.

Thibodeau encouraged those new to cycling or those who have not done it in some time to begin by using the trails in town. Joining the challenge next year can be another way to get cycling into one's life. It's a great way to set and reach personal cycling goals.

"Some want to win the whole thing, others want to get on a bike twice a week, some are recovering from an injury," Thibodeau said of those who join the Challenge.

"It's a lot of fun," Thibodeau said. "We have a lot of fun with the bike challenge every year. We have a lot of momentum."

The town of Simsbury is working on a Pedestrian and Bicycle Master Plan. To participate in a survey, visit www.surveymonkey.com/r/SimsburyPedBikePlan.