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What to wear when bicycle commuting?

By Lamont Jones
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



When the weather is good, Terry Plowman can get from home to his downtown Pittsburgh job in about 45 minutes.

Not by car or bus, but by bicycle. And after a quick change from his biking gear to business casual, Plowman is ready for another day of work at Verizon.

There are signs that more Americans are commuting to work on bikes, a trend fueled by environmental concerns and the rising cost of gasoline.

"It's unbelievable to me the change that has gone on over the past two or three years," said Brad Quartuccio, editor of Urban Velo, a Pittsburgh-based cycling magazine.

Quartuccio has been biking to work for more than a decade and notices more and fuller bike racks at sites ranging from office buildings to grocery stores.

Sean Brady, assistant executive director of Venture Outdoors, a recreational outfit based in Pittsburgh, agrees.

"It's gradually increased in the last seven years, especially the last year or so," he said. "Gas is probably the biggest inspiration, but the riverfront trails taking shape are part of it. And the culture around here really seems to be responding to outdoor opportunities."

Planning needed

Whether rolling along trails, designated lanes or crowded streets, for bike commuters heading to work there's the question of how to dress.

Most people who bike to work don't do so every day because of weather or schedules. But when they do, it takes planning because there's usually a need to groom and change clothes when arriving at work.

Plowman, 54, takes a change of clothes with him each day.

Others, like John Burgess at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, keep a mini-wardrobe at the office to avoid added weight on the bike. In nearly five years of biking to campus, the professor has discovered that it's best not to wear your work trousers on the 15-minute trip.

"You'll get grease on your pants, even when you're being careful," he said. "And on a hot day, you get sweaty."

Suits and heels

There's an added dimension for professional women, who may find it more difficult to manage a bike in a skirt or dress.

Barbara Brewton of Pittsburgh wears shorts or capris and a T-shirt, and carries a change of business-casual work clothes on her bike. Kim O'Dell of Mount Lebanon, her co-worker at the Heinz Family Foundation, keeps business suits and heels at the office.

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Both began biking to work a couple of days a week this summer and are fortunate that their office has showers, an iron and an ironing board.

O'Dell, 47, said her family of four "sat down in January and decided we were going to reduce our energy usage and waste."

Befriending hills

The many hills of Pittsburgh can be daunting, and they intimidated Brewton into putting her bike in storage when she and her family moved to Pittsburgh from Virginia 27 years ago.

But she began biking again when she and her husband began looking for more activities to do together as their children age. And it wasn't long before she was enjoying a 15-minute bike commute to work.

"The more I do it, the less overwhelming it seems," said Brewton, 48. "I have this mantra now: 'The hills are my friends.' I have to somehow embrace these hills or I'm not going to (bike) at all."

Whether one wears casual clothes or high-tech biker gear, some sort of clothing change at work is almost inevitable.

Brady, the Venture Outdoors vice president, who bikes from home to his downtown office several times a week year-round, said comfort and being visible are the two key factors in dressing for bike commuting to work.

He and others expect a continued rise in the number of people biking to work.

"It's a nationwide trend, and you're seeing increases all across the country," said Eric Boerer with Bike Pittsburgh, a nonprofit that promotes bike safety and public awareness.

"As a society," added Quartuccio at Urban Velo, "I don't think we're going to have any choice but to rethink our total reliance on cars for short trips."

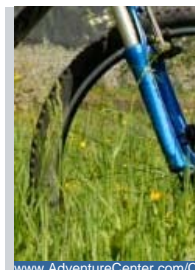
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