

WEST WINDSOR: Bike thefts on rise at train station

By Kristine Snodgrass, Staff Writer

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WEST WINDSOR — On a nice day, more than 100 bicycles can be found chained up to railings and bike racks at the Princeton Junction Train Station.

It's one way for commuters to get around the headaches of parking and traffic congestion at the station.

But lately those bikes have been going missing at a rate that is much higher than usual, according to township police, who have stepped up surveillance in the area.

Eleven bikes have been reported stolen over the course of the summer, according to Detective Sgt. Brian Melnick. It's not many compared to the total number of bikes there each day, but still "extremely high" for the train station, he said.

"If we get a bike stolen out of there every month or every two months, it's more than normal," he said.



Commuter's bicycles locked in bike racks at the Princeton Junction rail station. Staff photos by Mark Czajkowski

The thefts have been occurring during the day, between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., he said. Though some of the stolen bikes have been valued at upwards of \$300, thieves are not focusing solely on expensive bikes, he said.

In response, police have stepped up surveillance of the area and are reviewing security camera footage, though no arrests have been made.

The problem is that it's nearly impossible to catch the criminals if not in the act, Sgt. Melnick said. None of the bicycles reported stolen this summer have been recovered, he said, and it is believed the thieves are taking the bikes out of the area.

Surveillance operations have been set up to actively watch the bike racks, he said, but with thieves using wire cutters to quickly cut through locks, it's difficult for police to tell what's going on.

"You can't tell whether they put a key in the lock or snap the lock," he said.

Detectives hope the thefts will slow down following an arrest last week in Princeton of two people from Elizabeth who were caught red-handed stealing a bike, in possession of wire cutters, Sgt. Melnick said.

Princeton University Public Safety received a call around 3:25 p.m. Aug. 19 reporting a man and woman who appeared to be trying to steal a bike outside the Lewis Library, university spokeswoman Emily Aronson said.

When officers arrived, they saw a man and a woman outside the library, and saw the woman get on a bicycle matching the caller's description and pedal away, she said. Officers also saw that a cable locking another bike in the area had been cut.

The man and woman were stopped and questioned by Public Safety. After an investigation, Ronnie Marsh, 49, and Christina Marsh, 44, both of Westminster Avenue in Elizabeth, were arrested and charged with criminal attempt for theft of a bicycle, possession of burglary tools and criminal mischief, Ms. Aronson said. Both have been released and are scheduled to appear in Princeton Borough Municipal Court on Sept. 14.

It is believed that they were taking the train from northern New Jersey, stealing bikes in the Princeton area, and taking them out of the area, Sgt. Melnick said.

There has been just one bike theft reported at the train station since that arrest was made, he said.

It's not the first time there's been a problem with thefts at the train station. Earlier this year, police stepped up patrols at the train station in response to a string of car break-ins. Thieves were breaking car windows in order to steal electronics inside, such as laptops, radar detectors and GPS units.

Reports of those incidents have dropped off this summer, Sgt. Melnick said, perhaps due to increased surveillance of the area and the arrest of two suspects.

Police are continuing surveillance in hopes of nabbing a suspect. In the meantime, police recommend the use of solid bar bike locks that can't be cut with wire cutters.

"The more you invest in the lock, the better," Sgt. Melnick said.

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