

WEST WINDSOR & PLAINSBORO NEWS

Expanded Trails for Bike Group

by Cara Latham

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With the success the West Windsor Bicycle and Pedestrian Alliance has already seen in bringing improvements to the township's circulation system, the group now has its sights set on other towns, including Plainsboro.

To accomplish this task, new alliance President Chris Scherer has enlisted the aid of high school senior Jenny Yu to help take an inventory of all of Plainsboro's intersections.

The intersection assessment and inventory for Plainsboro will take place Saturday, May 16, beginning at the Millstone River School.

Yu, who is spearheading the effort, first got involved in the efforts through her participation on the Community Problem Solving Team at High School South. She is hoping to mirror what has already been done in West Windsor, and has an overall goal of improving conditions for pedestrians and cyclists and increase connectivity between the two communities.

The Community Problem Solving Team at South, called GREEN, participated in the Greening of West Windsor (GroWW) environmental fair last fall. It moved on to trail-building events with the Plainsboro Preserve and with the West Windsor Bicycle and Pedestrian Alliance, in November, 2008, when the kiosk at the Zaitz preserve was being moved.

Following that, the GREEN team attended one of the alliance's meetings during which the alliance described the mapping project its members had done last year in West Windsor. "Incidentally, we'd been talking about creating a map of pedestrian walkways in the township because we didn't know one existed already," said Yu. So, the students met with Chris Scherer, the new WWBPA president, about doing another mapping project, this time in Plainsboro.

"For me, it made the most sense because our students are from both West Windsor and Plainsboro," Yu says. "I think it's important for us to be doing Plainsboro because we want to be able to link West Windsor and Plainsboro better, in terms of bicycling and walking."

The project entails assessing almost 200 intersections in Plainsboro, and the information will be used to create an online map of all of the township's intersections.

Yu has been busy recruiting volunteers for the event and taking care of other important details. "I've plotted the longitude and latitude of each intersection and identified the roads," says Yu. "We have volunteers from High School North's Environment Club, the West Windsor Leo Club, and we have student volunteers from South, people from the communities, and the Bicycle and Pedestrian Alliance. We might have some people from McGraw Hill in East Windsor."

The event is supported by McGraw Hill's sixth annual Global Volunteer Day, and Yu says her group received a \$1,400 grant from the company to help with the efforts.

"The goal is not to compare in terms of the infrastructure, but to make sure that people know of safe roads to school so they can use these sidewalks and intersections," says Yu. "But also the goal of doing the assessment is to make sure we document the absence of structure."

With the GREEN Community Problem Solving Team, Yu says she has learned a lot just from her participation. "With all the environmental projects, and with the walkability assessment, I think we're realizing how much of an impact we have on the environment every day, and helping people to learn to minimize their effect on the environment is important."

Her involvement in this club is also right up her alley in terms of her future plans. Yu, who will be attending Northwestern University next year, plans to major in biochemistry and minor in environmental policy and culture. Originally from Highland Park, Yu moved to Plainsboro when she was in fifth grade because it was closer to her parents' jobs. Both are research scientists.

Yu herself has also been busy — aside from her work with the alliance — in research. At South she is on the Waksman team that is helping to sequence the genome of the brine shrimp. In addition, she serves on the school's committee for Relay for Life and is on the executive board of the Bloustein Scholars student program this year.

While her two fields of interest may seem unrelated, Yu says that there are many connections between the medical field and environmental science. During a lecture at Northwestern that Yu attended, she recalled the keynote speaker who said that "research is showing that there is a connection between medicine and the environment."

Following the walkability assessment on May 16, Yu plans to help input data and create the map that will be used to implement the improvements in Plainsboro. Following that, on Friday, June 5, Yu, along with her GREEN team, plans to hold an assembly event with the fifth grade environmental club at the Millstone River School, which will be a fun day for fifth graders to learn about recycling, renewable energy, and bicycle and pedestrian education.

Scherer, the newly-elected president of the alliance, succeeding Ken Carlson, who remains a trustee, hopes to make a difference in not only West Windsor, but Plainsboro and other surrounding towns.

In December, 2004, Scherer was riding his bike home from work to his home in West Windsor when a driver pulled out illegally in front of him. She did not yield, and Scherer collided with her, leaving him bloodied on the side of the road with a broken bicycle and broken glasses.

His head had hit her driver's side window, which resulted in 14 weeks of physical therapy. If he had not been wearing his helmet, he says, he wonders how much worse his injuries could have been. While he is an advocate for the use of helmets — the law in New Jersey states that any rider under the age of 17 must wear a helmet while riding a bicycle — his work includes more than simply promoting bicycle safety.

As the new president of the alliance, Scherer is now in charge of an organization that has grown to include over 350 members, many of them West Windsor residents — all in pursuit of making the township, and its surrounding areas, more bicycle and pedestrian friendly. They work with the township, county, and state officials to bring more crosswalks, sidewalks, bicycle lanes, and other bicycle/pedestrian friendly amenities to township roads. They also have worked to create walkability maps and take inventories of roads and areas in need of improvements for bicycle and pedestrian initiatives.

Now Scherer has goals of expanding the group's outreach to other towns, including Plainsboro, to help create a network of bicycle and pedestrian routes to help residents in the area find alternate — and safer — routes of transportation.

Scherer grew up in Arizona, later attending the University of Arizona. His father worked for almost 45 years as a stock broker with Merrill Lynch. His mother worked until Scherer's sister was born, at which time she stopped working, but remained involved in many volunteer initiatives. "It took me a while to figure out why she was pushing me to do all of that, but she was one of the biggest influences" in Scherer's decision to be active in the community himself.

During college, he studied in Seville, Spain, where he met his wife. After graduation, Scherer went back to school at the Thunderbird School of Global Management in Glendale, Arizona, where he earned his masters in international management and business. He also earned a masters in Spanish through a dual program with Esade Business School in Barcelona, Spain. His wife's job with GE Healthcare landed them in West Windsor in 1998.

The couple lived in West Windsor until 2006, when they moved to West Amwell. Still, Scherer remains dedicated to the WWBPA's work in West Windsor. "We have a connection here because we feel like we made a difference in West Windsor," he says.

Scherer has always been an avid bicyclist, starting in high school as a way to get into shape and lose weight. Eventually, it grew into a means of commuting and also a recreational hobby. Up until the time he was 15 years old, Scherer says there were no bicycle helmets. When he started riding on his own, however, he started do so with a helmet. He would ride his bicycle five days a week, a few miles, to his college. He eventually joined organizations that organized bike rides in the mornings and bike rides that took them for 50 to 75-mile trips.

The longest ride in which he participated was the Boston-Montreal-Boston Randonnee, which is a 90-hour, 750-mile

bike ride, which has been held since the 1890s. The 90 hours allotted for participants includes sleep time. Scherer finished the ride in 72:44, despite facing some problems, including issues with tendonitis. “That was the most grueling ride I ever did,” he says. “It was absolutely brutal.”

“I’ve done ultra-long distance cycling and have become aware of all the problems that bicyclists face from all those years of experience on the road,” he says. “It’s just been an interest of mine to make a difference, to work on education with motorists.” On the engineering side of things, he also finds it interesting to work with municipalities to provide infrastructure necessary to ensure bicyclists and pedestrians are safe.

Scherer was part of Mayor Shing-Fu Hsueh’s bicycle and pedestrian task force, and when the task force’s work was completed, Scherer says he and other participants felt like there were still much more work to accomplish. It was Scherer’s idea to create a 501c3 nonprofit charity, and by January, 2006, the group had gone through the entire process of becoming a corporation and obtaining nonprofit status. Since then, the group has continued to formalize its mission and vision. Scherer served as the group’s first vice president and was still a trustee before being selected as its president.

There are two main issues that need to be addressed — infrastructure and behavior, Scherer says. Infrastructure requires the evaluation of what is out there, and the engineering of it, and the other part of it is education and enforcement. This year, the WWBPA will continue its walkability and bikeability assessments, in Plainsboro, and also in Hightstown, where a similar assessment will take place.

From the very start, Scherer says he was very adamant in that the vision for the WWBPA should include neighboring communities. “If you go five miles in any direction, you’re going to be in another municipality, and you may even go through a couple,” he says. “People don’t live and work just where their homes are. It’s important to have those connections to other communities.”

The WWBPA has been advocating the creation of a Mercer County pedestrian task force to have more of an influence in the county, so that bike and pedestrian maps can be available to everyone. Scherer — who worked as a security and controls officer (a position that combines a risk management role with one involving project management) — has also helped the WWBPA get grants from his company. The company allows its employees to apply for employee volunteer grants and also participates in Global Volunteer Day. One such grant funded the creation of the walkability map for West Windsor.

The alliance will continue this year with its West Windsor Walks events as well as the National Trails Day and Pedal for Progress, both of which take place in June. It has also planned the community bike ride for September and International Walk to School Day, which will take place in October. During the group’s annual meeting earlier this year, there were other position changes. Gerry Foster became a trustee, and Susan Conlon moved up to the position of first vice president. Barbara Carlson became the new treasurer, and two new student advisers were added — Jason Chin of High School North, and Caroline Kellner, Nishitha Kumar, and Emma Rosen, all of High School South.

For Scherer, the first part of his passion comes from riding his bike, which he calls an addiction. “It’s been documented that it becomes addictive because of the endorphins and the way you feel,” he says. “It’s the best stress reliever — it clears your mind.”

While the hobby is enjoyable, Scherer says he is also driven by his belief that it is important to promote bicycling because it is the most efficient form of transportation, and that it is affordable, and it solves pollution, energy, and transportation issues at once. “It’s such a great alternative to cars,” he says. “You can go pretty far in a short amount of time. You’re doing double duty — you’re being healthy to your body and mind, but also getting somewhere and not polluting. It’s multi-tasking at its finest.”