

OLDER AND WISER: There are many options when it comes to biking

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North Shore MLAs Ralph Sultan and Jane Thornthwaite take a ride on a “trishaw” with Jennifer Reid of Cycling Without Age at the North Shore Seniors’ Health Expo held Sept. 6. photo Ben Bengtson, North Shore News

Seniors: cycling is good for you and there are many ways to get biking. Now, it looks like a program which encourages cycling for seniors of all abilities is coming to the North Shore.

Some seniors give up their bikes because they feel that biking is no longer an option for getting about or for exercise because bikes are not safe after a certain age. However, Robert Ryes, who writes a blog about biking, found at cyclingcity.com, states: “There are many more statistics that show that cycling for seniors is not only safe but healthy.”

He says that safe biking for seniors requires using some common-sense strategies such as preparing your equipment, trying not to keep up with those who can ride faster, remembering your reflexes might be slower than when you were younger, never wearing headphones and planning your route carefully.

There are many benefits to cycling. Ryes says that biking for seniors is good for your heart, provides low impact and less stress exercise, improves the memory and increases strength, and, if you bike with a friend or group, camaraderie.

Biking is good for the environment, economical and fun. Bikes do not use gas, so they don't pollute the environment and beyond the initial outlay for the bike and accessories, they are economical.

They are also an enjoyable way to get out and about. When I bike, I feel that it gets me outdoors in a way that walking, and driving cannot (although I love walking for exercise).

I can experience nature more closely than when driving, get to a destination faster than walking, I do not use gas, and I have fun.

There are many ways to bike if you are a senior, including using a regular bike which requires pedalling, using an electric pedal-assisted bike, or taking a spin on a person-assisted bike called a "Trishaw." A Trishaw is three-wheel bicycle with seating for two passengers up front and a pilot who pedals the bike from behind.

As many of us know, biking or walking on the hilly North Shore can be a challenge. That is why many people are opting for an electric pedal-assisted bike – I haven't tried it yet but hope to soon. People have told me that they will never go back to their regular bike.

Many seniors cannot use a regular or electric pedal assisted bike for several reasons including mobility, co-ordination, sight, hearing or balance issues. These issues can be challenging for seniors as they can lead to social isolation, loneliness, loss of independence and depression.

For those reasons, Cycling Without Age was created. This international program founded by Ole Kassow and based in Copenhagen is now located in 42 countries. The organization's purpose is to offer recreational mobility to seniors, in the form of volunteer-piloted trishaw rides.

The Cycling Without Age Canada website states this program is for disabled people or mobility-challenged seniors. "Time spent with the volunteers on the trishaw breaks them free from their social isolation. The program gives them wind in their hair, the ability to connect with nature, and the chance to share their stories," the website states.

The website also states that the program is not just about the riders but also about the “pilot,” the volunteer who pedals the Trishaw. It is about “active citizenship”, getting the volunteer to connect with the riders and to learn from them. “

It’s about creating relationships and connections between people.” The oldest pilot from Denmark, Jorgen Hass, is 90 and the oldest passenger Madam Yeo Iu, from Singapore, is 107.

Annwen Loverin, executive director of Silver Harbour Seniors’ Activity Centre, states in the centre’s September newsletter that “the closest operating chapter to us is in Victoria and one in Vancouver is starting this Spring. The North Shore chapter is hard on their heels with a vibrant group headed by Ian Rose-Innes, an active member of the West Vancouver Seniors’ Activity Centre and the associated cycling community.”

The Chapter will serve all residents of North and West Vancouver, free of charge, and be owned and operated by Silver Harbour with support from the West Vancouver Seniors’ Activity Centre. If you’re interested contact the new North Shore chapter at Silver Harbour which will be up and running soon.

Luckily, we have a year-round cycling season on the North Shore, although I’ll admit that I am a fair-weather cyclist, and there are many ways to bike, so keep the cycling option in mind.

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