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Local group in National Bike Challenge

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By RYAN JARVI - Journal Staff Writer , Mining Journal

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MARQUETTE - With National Bike to Work Week kicking off Monday and National Bike to Work Day on Friday, there's been a friendly rivalry brewing between bicyclists in the Marquette County area and those in the Keweenaw Peninsula.

Both areas have received awards for past efforts to improve biking networks, and both currently have local groups competing in the National Bike Challenge, an event that runs from May 1 through Sept. 30.

"We created a Marquette County Bike Challenge to help encourage those in Marquette to get out and ride, and to have some fun with it as well," said Tara Laase-McKinney, promotions and events coordinator for the Marquette Downtown Development Authority.

The challenge is organized by the nonprofit PeopleForBikes and offers various prizes to winning bicyclists that meet certain criteria.

"It is a free and easy way to challenge one's self and fellow community members to ride more while competing on a local, state and national level," Laase-McKinney said.

To sign up, visit www.nationalbikechallenge.org and register for an account using the zip code 49855 to be automatically entered into the Marquette County Bike Challenge group.

Registered riders get one point for every mile ridden, along with 20 points for each day a rider completes at least 1 mile.

"This helps to even the playing field between those who put in big miles, and those who do more frequent but shorter rides," Laase-McKinney said.

Various ride-recording apps, such as Strava or Map My Ride, can be connected to the site to update miles automatically.

Brad Neumann, a member of the community organized Marquette Bikeability Committee, said this was his first year joining the challenge.

"It's got both a recreation aspect to it and a transportation element," he said. "Individuals can log their rides in either of those two categories, and it's set up where an individual can score points for their community just by riding one mile. ... So it's not something where somebody has to spend a lot of time on their bike and go for a 20 mile ride to contribute to the challenge. It's those shorter trips that actually can maybe score the most points."

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As of Friday afternoon, 54 people had joined the Marquette County group, biking a total of 1,035 miles.

The group called Bike Initiative Keweenaw, also known as BIKE!, has 330 riders, and has reported a riding total of 7,615 miles.

"We have a lot of bikers here," Neumann said of Marquette County. "If we can just get them on board, (BIKE!) might have a run, or bike, for their money."

Kristen Schmitt, member of BIKE!, said the group has organized a local challenge for Houghton and Keweenaw counties since 2013.

"Last year our group took the top spot nationally for local challenges, with 281 riders logging over 119,000 miles during the 5-month-long challenge," Schmitt said.

She said the group hopes to hit 400 riders this year and log 150,000 miles, with some upcoming events such as the Keweenaw Bike to Work Day on Friday and Ride the Keweenaw, scheduled for May 27-29, expected to play a part in reaching those goals.

"Last year we had a couple of local challenges that were close competitors. I think this helped spark some enthusiasm in our area and encourage people to ride to the store instead of driving for that one extra trip, or to head to the trails after work," Schmitt said.

"We'd love to see more of a challenge from our neighbors in Marquette County. Although there is definitely some friendly rivalry that happens with the National Bike Challenge, ultimately it all contributes to BIKE!'s broader mission of getting more people to ride bikes more often, so a healthy challenge from Marquette would be a win-win situation for all of us."

For more information on the Keweenaw group, visit nationalbikechallenge.org/local-challenge/1505.

For more information on the Marquette County group, visit nationalbikechallenge.org/local-challenge/1592.

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