

Ontario by Bike Network rolls into town



From left, George Offshack of Limerick Lake Lodge, Ruth Pot of FairTradeWorks, Christine FitzSimons of Riverside Suites and County of Hastings economic development officer Mark Hanley work on a bicycle trip planning exercise during the Ontario by Bike Network workshop in Bancroft on March 6. / JIM EADIE Special to This Week

By Jim Eadie

The Ontario by Bike Network rolled into Bancroft March 6 and conducted a workshop with nearly 50 local small business and service persons to assist them to be more prepared to welcome cycle tourists.

"Cycle tourism is growing tremendously internationally, as well as in Ontario," said Louisa Mursell, one of the presenters. "Cycle tourists spend more and stay longer than regular visitors. In Ontario we had 1.7 million cycling visitors who spend more than \$500 million annually. In the U.S. they spend \$47 billion annually, and it is growing."

A cycle tourist is defined as a person or group that travels more than 40 kilometres from home and incorporates cycling in their trip. Mursell noted that cycle tourists are looking for services and amenities that are bicycle friendly and to know where these services are in Ontario when planning trips. This is where the network fits in, with local workshops on becoming bicycle friendly, supporting bicycle trails and events and understanding the needs of various types of cycling options.

In order to maintain delivery of exceptional service, locations can be registered and certified as bicycle friendly by the network.

"We have an interactive online map of Ontario showing all of the certified bicycle friendly businesses," said Michael McCreesh, project manager of network.

"Cyclists use it to look for trails and amenities during trip planning. It gives a greater footprint for small businesses. Our marketing research has shown that people look at websites when trip planning and then, once there, prefer printed maps or smartphone apps. Who can participate? Accommodations, campgrounds, food services providers, tourist attractions and other businesses."

Each certified business or attraction has a page attached to the interactive map where they can upload information and photographs. "Cafes and gift shops are popular and the word gets around the cycling communities," said McCreesh. "When the community has a good network it speaks to the consumer."

A certified business or attraction will be required to meet a standard, to ensure quality assurance for the cyclist. The requirements depend on the type of business but include such things as a covered secure bike storage area, cycling information including route maps, a basic bicycle repair kit, healthy local food and beverage options and standards for accommodations including shower and bathroom facilities.

"I got certified last year," said George Offshack, owner and operator of Limerick Lake Lodge near Gilmour. "I put in some bike racks and bought a tool kit? It cost me about \$400. I have had some business already."

His business came from touring groups who noted that his accommodations were about halfway between the Haliburton area and the Belleville.

"They were going to catch the VIA rail bike train," he said.

Certain VIA routes have an extra car that is designated bicycle friendly, a sure sign that the bicycle movement is growing. According to their website, the network is one branch of Transportation Options, a non-profit organization dedicated to fostering sustainable transportation and tourism ideas and innovations by engaging in research, project development and promotion of choices that are healthy, integrated, convenient, economically beneficial and environmentally sound. All of its services are free. The VIA bike train is one of their other initiatives.

Dr. Greg Cooper gave a brief presentation about his bicycle travels from one end of Canada to the other, and from top to bottom with his children.

Further information about the network can be obtained by contacting Community Futures Development Corporation of North Hastings, Central Hastings and South Algonquin at 613-332-5564. The Corporation sponsored the event with the North Hastings Economic Development Committee, the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport, Ontario's Highlands Tourism Organization.