



Trail Greeters

Maria Smith

Cumberland Times-News

— CUMBERLAND - Loaded with a couple bottles of Gatorade, a bike repair kit and his trail ambassador arm band, Jim Lechliter set off along the Great Allegheny Passage in Maryland to guide those in need.

On a cool, blustery Friday, though, he didn't pass many people.

Come good weather, though, he knows the scenario will be different.

"There's a lot of people out there who travel light and they don't have a lot of things," he said. "If they have trouble with their bike, if a chain comes off, they have no idea how to put it back on."

As one of 37 designated trail ambassadors, Lechliter of Short Gap, W.Va., can help guide such repairs and even provide a power drink or water to those who have over-extended themselves.

Sometimes it's a matter of stopping to chat with people and offering them information as to where rest rooms and eateries are to how far it is to the Paw Paw Tunnel to the east or the Brush Tunnel, if they're headed west. Having just ridden the trail from Frostburg on Friday, he and two other trail ambassadors met at the Western Maryland Railway Station and found themselves assuming their role as they spoke to two families - one from Jefferson, N.Y., and the other from Murrysville, Pa., all in less than 45 minutes.

A quick reminder to the Buck family of New York - remember to get a parking pass after they toured the visitors' center or it would be \$3 to lift the gate.

It's information like that, though, the ambassadors provide.

Larry Brock is coordinating the ambassador program, which is under the auspices of the Western Maryland Wheelman. The local nonprofit volunteer group also is working in conjunction with the Allegany County Chamber of Commerce's tourism department.

Modeled after the bike patrol program that looks after the C&O Canal towpath, Brock said the idea is to be a helper rather than an enforcer. Ambassadors cover the trail from the railway station west to the Mason-Dixon line.

"Our goal is to be friends," Brock of LaVale said. "When you go to Disney Land, everyone has a smile and say's hello. A smile will break the ice if you want to ask a question."

That's what he's looking for in an ambassador - a smile, one who likes to use the trail and who wants to "spread the good word."

He said when ambassadors are faced with an enforcement issue, they are to back away and contact local authorities.

Brock and another ambassador, Lynn DeHart of Cumberland, also remain part of the towpath patrol.

DeHart said he moved back to town about two years ago after he retired. He's met a number of people from out of town who ask "what's that or where is there." That alone makes the ambassador program worth having. "We complement, we don't cross over, to what the C&O Canal bike patrol does," the Cumberland resident said.

DeHart also sees the trail as the "best economic venture" that the county could have; it's nonpolluting and doesn't require "heavy infrastructure."

A workshop was held in March for potential ambassadors but it's not "on the job training" for those who ride or walk the trail and want to become an ambassador.

Ambassadors must be at least 18 unless they're with an adult who has completed the training.

It's also suggested that they carry trail maps and rule cards, a bike repair and First Aid kits, a notebook to jot down information, cell phone, tire pumps and tubes and a bag for litter.

For more information, visit <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/WMWGAPTARTf> or call Brock at (301) 697-4343 or e-mail him at lbrock@gapselstorage.net.

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Photos



Trail ambassadors Larry Brock, left, and Lynn DeHart and Jim Lechliter, right, talk with Gary and Betsy Gaillot of Murrysville, Pa., on the Great Allegheny Passage in Maryland near the Western Maryland Railway Station in Cumberland. Serving as helpers on bikes, the ambassadors can offer a drink of water, help with simple repairs or tell visitors where to find rest rooms or food. Cumberland Times-News