

ThisWeek Community Newspapers

Neon two-wheelers available at no charge

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Bill Owens, Nicole Metzger and Mark Buddelmeyer stand in front of the Clintonville Beechwold Community Resources Center and one of its green bikes. Owens is the CRC executive director. Metzger is a student intern from the OSU College of Social Work. Buddelmeyer is a Clintonville resident and an intern from Columbus State Community College.

Clintonville Beechwold Community Resources Center officials want people to, as the song says, "Come on and take a free ride."

In this case it's on neon-green bicycles that people can borrow at no charge for up to three days.

The CRC Green Bike Project, which is modeled on the Yellow Bike Project of Portland, Ore., which in turn was derived from the White Bicycles of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, is in keeping with the overall mission of the center, according to executive director Bill Owens.

In part, this is to help people in the neighborhood enjoy a better quality of life.

"It provides people with free transportation to get from place to place," Owens said. "Also, though, it provides people an opportunity to have a healthier lifestyle in that they can exercise using these bicycles, and they may find that bicycles fit into their lifestyles such that they want to get a bicycle themselves."

Back in the 1990s, Owens recalled, he saw a segment on the television show "20-20," or one very much like it, about the Yellow Bike Project in Portland, which dated back to September 1993 and involved brightly painted refurbished two-wheelers being located around the city for anyone to use.

A little publicity about the effort, which was based on the White Bicycles Amsterdammers began sharing as long ago as the 1960s, helped launch Portland's project, according to an online history by founders Thomas O'Keefe and Joe Keating.

"It appears that there are thousands of old, abandoned bikes in people's garages and people love the spirit of free community bikes," they wrote.

"Since I've been at the CRC, I've always wanted to do something like this," Owens said last week.

The much more recent Green Bike Project is the result of a grant obtained through the **Community Health Funders' Collaborative of Columbus**, which was formed in the fall of 2006 by the United Way of Central Ohio, Osteopathic Heritage Foundation, Columbus Foundation and the Columbus Medical Association Foundation.

"The Community Health Funders' Collaborative is a philanthropic partnership created to sustain community improvement through focused initiatives and leveraged funding," according to the website. "It is composed of private, community and corporate funders whose focus includes improving health and quality of life in Franklin County, Ohio."

Money from the collaborative, Owens said, helped set up not only the Green Bike Project but also enabled CRC personnel to increase and improve a community garden on the property of the Cornerstone Deli.

Money toward the free bicycle effort paid for not only bikes but also helmets, locks and bike racks, "heavy, sturdy ones that will be there forever," Owens said. The racks can accommodate a dozen bikes. The number in the program fluctuates, but has been as many as 10.

"Some of them haven't come back, so as people see any neon-green painted bicycles abandoned anywhere in the community please let us know or bring them to us," Owens said.

In one instance, the executive director said, a homeless person borrowed one of the bikes, but it was destroyed when the tent he had leaned it against was destroyed by fire.

Still, Owens said, who has more need of free transportation than someone who can't afford a place to live?

In fact, he added, a homeless person was using one of the bikes to get to and from a job last week.

"So it's really helping him to work his out of homelessness," Owens added.

The bright green color serves several purposes.

"We paint the tires and everything, and that's copying the idea of the Yellow Bike project in Portland," Owens said. "It accomplishes a couple of things. It makes the bicycle easier to see so the rider is safer. It helps us with publicity so people see the bicycles around the neighborhood and learn about the project and become involved. And the idea is ... it would be less likely to be stolen because it would be clear it's from the project."

The bikes have stickers, as well, identifying them as the property of the Community Resources Center.

The procedure for using one of the bikes is to show up at the center and fill out an application that includes information on safe riding. The bicycle, lock and helmet are to be returned after a maximum of three days.

"We're just really starting into it, but we plan on just going on forever with it because it's meeting a need, it's a very inexpensive thing to operate. The more support we get in terms of people donating bicycles and helping us maintain bicycles, it'll have a life of its own and like all our projects help people lead a better life here in Clintonville."