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Bike riders, walkers to be counted

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Vancouver volunteers will be looking for bicycle riders and walkers next week. (FILES/The Columbian)

A small group of Vancouver volunteers next week will take the first step to improving pedestrian and bicycle access by counting the number of people navigating six selected streets on two wheels and their own two feet.

Vancouver is among 17 cities statewide participating in the census, the first of what organizers hope to be an annual event.

“It allows us to ask ourselves ‘What aren’t we doing?’ ” said David Hiller, advocacy director for Seattle-based Cascade Bicycle Club, which is co-sponsoring the census with the Washington Department of Transportation. “If we see anomalous places where use is stagnant, it will lead us to ask other land-use questions.”

Volunteers may spot safety issues, such as bike lanes and sidewalks inadequately separated from auto traffic. Hiller said the census may prompt land-use planners to consider deeper issues, such as failure to promote easy connections between homes, parks, stores and offices.

Hiller noted that Washington is doing comparatively well by that account, with the League of American Bicyclists recently scoring the Evergreen State as the most bicycle-friendly state in the union. (Oregon was fourth.)

“Being first among 50 doesn’t mean we’ve finished,” Hiller said. “It just means we’re a nose ahead in a long race. We still have a system that prioritizes cars over kids in our local communities, that forgets that cars don’t purchase anything — people do.”

Four of the six census sites in Vancouver will be in or near downtown, said Todd Boulanger, a senior transportation planner for the city.

“Because of the interest in the downtown and interstate crossings, we’re focusing on I-5 and I-205,” he said.

The census will take place Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, though the specific day for Vancouver has yet to be selected. Don’t be surprised to see volunteers armed with notepads between 7 and 9 a.m. and 4 to 6 p.m. on one of those days at the following locations: the Interstate 5 Bridge near Columbia Street; McLoughlin Boulevard at Fort Vancouver Way; Mill

Plain Boulevard at Fort Vancouver Way; Columbia Street at Evergreen Boulevard; the Evergreen Highway near the old Vancouver Fish Hatchery; and a spot near the I-205 Bridge at East 23rd and Ellsworth Street.

The rest of the nation conducted its count the week of Sept. 8.

Vancouver-Clark Parks and Recreation piggybacked on the national survey organized earlier this month by Metro, the regional government of the Portland area.

Volunteers surveyed bicycle and pedestrian use on six recreational trails in the area.

The bulk of people responding to that survey indicated they were using the trails for exercise, and almost half indicated they'd like to see the trails made longer.