

Charlotte health department pedals ahead

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CHARLOTTE COUNTY — Secure bike lockers, employees who pedal to work, and showers for commuting staff have earned the Charlotte County Health Department a bronze award this week for being a bicycle friendly business from the League of American Bicyclists.

The Charlotte County Health Department is the first in the U.S. to receive the award, according to Bill Nesper, director of the league's Bicycle Friendly America Program in Washington, D.C.

The league is a 25,000-member organization that rewards communities and, more recently, businesses and workplaces ranging from nonprofits to corporations that are bike-friendly. More than 750 bike clubs are members.

"A health department doing this makes a whole lot of sense," Nesper said. "They are putting their money where their mouth is, setting a good example, and this is exactly the type of thing a health department would want to do."

The Charlotte Health Department was one of 31 workplaces around the U.S. to receive the bronze award. Others include Eli Lilly and Co., Providence Alaska Medical Center, and REI.

Gold award winners include MIT Lincoln Lab, the Washington Area Bicyclist Association, and Bicycle Technologies International.

Eric Stockley, an avid bicyclist who has ridden on five continents, works as a prevention training consultant for the Charlotte County Health Department.

He became involved a few years ago in efforts to make Charlotte County a more bicycle-friendly community, sitting on pedestrian planning committees and attending meetings.

When he heard that Punta Gorda had been recognized as a bicyclefriendly place, he decided to take the concept to work, putting together a comprehensive program that included installing bike racks, encouraging employees to ride bikes to work, and making showers available to those who arrived at work sweaty.

The Charlotte Health Department has 116 employees, and about nine commute by bike several days a week to the new Port Charlotte facility at 1100 Loveland Boulevard, Stockley said.

"Our goal is to get to 20 percent commuting at least partially by bike or by foot," Stockley said. "We're very proud of the award. More importantly, we're now challenging other businesses to step up to the plate and follow our example."

According to Stockley, employees who commute to work under their own steam use less sick time and lose an average of 13 pounds the first year doing it. A person who commutes by bike two days a week saves an average of 1,600 pounds of greenhouse gas emissions per year.

"It's good for the environment, and it's good for our employees," Stockley said. "If our school board and county (employees) did that, imagine how much gas emissions we could save."

The health department has an incentive program that rewards employees for tracking miles. It also has an agreement with Commuter Services through the Florida Department of Transportation to reimburse employees for cab fare if they ride a bike to work in the morning but are unable to ride it back home after work.

For more information on how to be a bike friendly business, go to www.bikeleague.org.

