

For six hours on Sunday, cars are banned on six miles of North Portland's streets, leaving them to walkers, cyclists, joggers and in-line skates

For six hours, cyclists, walkers, in-line skaters and joggers take over six miles of Portland streets

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Thousands of Portland-area residents walked, biked, ran and Rollerbladed through six miles of North Portland streets Sunday, freed by an experiment that closed off the streets to car traffic for six hours.

Like a chain of neighborhood block parties, city organizers banned cars from a loop of streets and scheduled hours of music, food, dance lessons and other activities at parks along the route.

A first for Portland, the event was a huge draw for families -- some looking to gain confidence in riding bicycles and others just looking to get out and enjoy an early summer day. Enthusiasm and smiles abounded, even as cyclists hit the brakes to navigate around one other.

For 7-year-old Sophie Casey, who rides her bike to school with her dad in the Rose City Park neighborhood of Northeast Portland, the appeal of Sunday's event was obvious.

"We don't have to worry about the cars," she said.

More than a year in the planning, Sunday Parkways was an experiment based on a similar weekly event in Bogota, Colombia, that closes more than 70 miles of major and minor roads each Sunday. Organizers view it as a way to encourage exercise and connect communities.

In Portland, a six-mile loop of small neighborhood streets was closed to auto traffic from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Motorists were allowed to drive into the loop, and on major streets that crossed the loop, where police directed bike and auto traffic.

It's uncertain whether Portland will replicate Sunday's event. Organizers said it seemed a financial reality that sponsorships will be needed to cover expenses like hiring police to direct traffic. Sponsors covered the city's \$150,000 tab for Sunday's activity.

But nearly universal positive feedback seemed to encourage organizers.

"My face hurts from smiling all day," said Linda Ginenthal, a Portland Office of Transportation manager who spearheaded the effort.

Ginenthal said she had a hunch Portlanders would love the idea, but she still didn't know what to expect.

When news of the event spread last week, about a dozen people e-mailed and called media, predicting big disruptions to businesses and complaints about "forcing" people not to drive.

But in North Portland on Sunday, there was little evidence of disruption and city officials had fielded no complaints other than a few stray comments from passers-by. Some businesses, such as the 5th Quadrant restaurant along a bike path near the route, had brisk business from participants.

Cyclists came from as far as Beaverton for the chance to ride unthreatened by autos.

It seemed like an iconic Portland event that should be repeated, said Lara Pevzner, 32, who moved from Detroit 10 years ago.

"In Detroit they show off their cars, in Portland they show off their bikes," said Pevzner, who pedaled to the event from the Sellwood area of Southeast Portland.

"I can't really see how anyone would be upset with it," said Ryan Cotton of the Overlook neighborhood. "It has a very Portland feel to it."

Ryan and Sara Cotton, both 29, walked more than two miles pushing their 7-month-old son Colin in a stroller when they arrived at Arbor Lodge Park at about 1 p.m.

Now and then, the Cottons said, they would stray from the street onto the sidewalk, falling back into the habit of tense vigilance, looking out for cars.

"It's kind of a weird, different feeling walking down the middle of the street," Ryan Cotton said.

David Rebanal and his wife, who live a few blocks from the street closure, invited a half-dozen families over for a potluck, followed by cycling the route together.

"There's a personal benefit, that I'm getting exercise, but there's also a community benefit," said Rebanal, who rode with daughter Ophelia, 7. "That's why it worked so well."

Alice Holmes, 83, smiled and waved at the throngs of cyclists passing by the front yard of the North Bryant Street house where she has lived for 50 years. Her friend Maurice Lower, also 83, and her miniature dachshund, Molly, watched for more than 1 1/2 hours.

"The thing I love too are the families being together, I love seeing that," Holmes said. "This action makes me feel younger."

Some residents along the route put on garage sales as the thousands streamed by. Others like Holmes watched and waved.

The only inconvenience seemed to stem from the event's popularity.

Ginenthal, with the city, said she had expected major streets to have intermitted "gaps" between crowds of cyclists. That would allow cars to proceed, with police supervising.

But there were no gaps Sunday.

"There's just constant bikes," she said.

Cyclists outnumbered cars at some major intersections by more than 10 to one. For instance, at the corner of Rosa Parks Way and North Kerby Avenue, by Peninsula Park, police stopped cyclists at about 1 p.m. to let 20 or so cars through the intersection, clearing all that waited.

Then, police opened it for cyclists: more than 200 streamed through in about a minute.

When 2 p.m. came, the police left, and passing cyclists went back to watching for cars.

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