

Bergen County communities recognized for exercise efforts

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October is Walk and Bike to School month, and seven elementary schools in Bergen County were recognized for their efforts to promote safe and healthy lifestyles.

The National Center for Safe Routes to School coordinates the national Walk and Bike to School Day, while regional organizations set up the Safe Routes to School program in collaboration with schools, municipalities and other partners.

(Photo: Jaimie Julia Winters/NorthJersey.com file photo)

Wood-Ridge-based EZ Ride worked as the regional coordinating organization for the sixth year and teamed up with 55 schools, 15 municipalities and several hundred local partners in Bergen, Essex, Monmouth, Passaic and Union counties.

“For the last seven or eight years there has been a lot of focus on walking and biking,” said Krishna Murthy, executive director for EZ Ride.

The non-profit visits schools and communities. “We talk to younger kids because our goal has been to catch them when they are young,” Murthy said. “It seems to work better. By the time they hit middle school, kids think they know everything.”

Biking: [Mural unveiled at Bloomfield bike depot](#)

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Murthy said that they provide literature and coloring books to kids — anything to get them thinking about walking and biking. They also conduct events such as bike rodeos, where kids ride around a course and learn how to signal and how to stop.

They also recognize schools and communities for taking the initiative when it comes to promoting healthy alternatives.

Robert L. Craig School in Moonachie received first-step recognition. Berkeley School and Brookside Elementary in Westwood each received gold recognition. The boroughs of Rutherford and Westwood as well as Lincoln School and Washington School in Rutherford received silver recognition.

The levels of recognition are based on activity, Murthy said.



Westwood Mayor John Birkner Jr. is proud of the efforts being made in town.

“We encourage healthy activity through the Mayor Wellness campaign and we have a great relationship with the school district, so we promote cooperative efforts to promote healthy activity,” said Birkner. “We promote Safe Routes to School in conjunction with that effort and pedestrian safety initiative

particularly in regard to school crossings.”

Superintendent Jack Hurley noted that programs in Rutherford also involve town officials.

“It is just a healthy and practical activity for students, and anything we can do to strengthen community ties is a good thing,” Hurley said. “We do this in partnership with the mayor and council. It really helps to build a strong community.”

Officials in Westwood also work to provide information to parents, students and the public to make people aware of traffic laws as well as pedestrian safety, vehicle safety and Safe Routes to School, Birkner said.



Rutherford has also held additional safety events for students.

“For the last two years, we’ve had the bike rodeo for third-graders. People come in and teach bike safety and how to ride a bike,” Hurley said. “It’s great to see those students that can’t learn how to with some help. They learn about safety and wearing a helmet and pedestrian safety. It’s a community

effort with the mayor and council and the Police Department.”

One of the aspects of the program is a travel tally, which is a record of how students get to school during a given period of time, usually a week.

“They get points for doing that, and it creates a document that lists how kids get to school. This is to come up with hard data,” Murthy said. “It’s almost a study for how kids get to school. Then that information is used to do a roadway audit of major roadways. Someone will look for missing sidewalks, debris, other major impediments and safety issues like lack of crosswalks.”

That information can also be used to apply for federal grant money for roadway improvements, Murthy said.

“It’s a way we get kids and teachers involved, and it creates a photo of ‘here’s what we found and what we need to do.’ ”

Rutherford has started to use that information in a practical way.

“There was a grant to the Green Team for Safe Routes to School that will give us a few bike racks,” Hurley said.

Birkner noted that efforts have been made in Westwood, including a \$4.4 million project downtown to integrate modern safety tools.

“We want to raise public awareness for both pedestrians and motorists, because they share the road,” Birkner said.



The idea of Walk and Bike to School month is not unique to the United States. It’s actually international, and it is a way to “get people reintroduced to the idea” of walking or biking to school because it is “a forgotten skill,” Murthy said.

“We want people to start with just once in a while, maybe once this month, and then move on from there,” Murthy said.

“One of the biggest incentives has to do with health,” Murthy said. “Obesity is a national epidemic. This will be the first generation with a shorter lifespan than their parents. It’s nice to talk about, but this is their health. It is a great resource to talk to and brainstorm ideas. We are able to get entities to work together to focus on kids and promote a culture of health.”