

Circle route links Niagara

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John Crossingham remembers when supporters of a region-wide system of bicycle trails linking Niagara's various communities first started talking about the idea more than 14 years ago.

"People were saying, who'll ever use that?" he recalled.

How times have changed. This weekend, the dream of such a trail system officially becomes reality with the opening of the Greater Niagara Circle Route.

Crossingham, a St. Catharines lawyer and Rotarian who was a driving force behind funding for a final, vital link in the trail, said you need only look at the trail today to see those who fought for it had a wise vision.

On Easter weekend, when the weather was less than stellar, he rode his bike along the trail and saw people walking their dogs, riding their bikes and rollerblading.

Before the trail system could be completed, though, a major obstacle had to be overcome: an abandoned stretch of the Welland Canal.

Crossingham spent about a year and a half visiting Niagara's 13 Rotary clubs to push for donations so a pedestrian bridge could be built over the canal near the Allanburg Bridge in Thorold.

Collectively, the Rotary clubs donated about \$50,000 for the bridge, opening the way for the Circle Route to link various communities. The 50-tonne bridge was completed in February.

In turn, the bridge was named the Rotary Niagara Bridge, in honour of the service club's donations and its 100th anniversary.

"Building bridges between people is what Rotary is all about," Crossingham said Tuesday. "It (a bridge) symbolically links all the Rotary clubs of Niagara."

The Circle Route covers about 150 kilometres and intersects the municipalities of St. Catharines, Thorold, Welland, Port Colborne, Fort Erie, Niagara Falls and Niagara-on-the-Lake, with hookups to already developed or planned trails in Pelham, Grimsby, Lincoln, West Lincoln and Wainfleet.

Crossingham is among a growing number of supporters convinced the route, which will allow cyclists or hikers to ply the trail beside the entire 47-kilometre Welland Canal from St. Catharines to Port Colborne, will be a hit with tourists and locals alike.

Crossingham said he actively seeks out vacation spots with such trails where he can hop on his bike.

"Most of our vacations over the last 15 years have been on two wheels."

Art Wing, a member of the St. Catharines Rotary Club and district Rotary governor, said all Niagara residents will be able to benefit from the new trail system.

"It's just a great asset to be added to our community. I'm looking forward to having time to ride the trail."

The Circle Route opens at noon on Saturday at the new pedestrian bridge just north of Regional Road 20 on the west side of the Allanburg Bridge. Town criers from St. Catharines, Port Colborne and Thorold will be there, along with the Thorold Pipe Band.