

Transportation woes discussed at island planning meeting

By Jessica Borges/Daily News staff

7/14/2006

NEWPORT - Tired of searching to no avail for a rack to chain your bike to, or having to stand while you wait at a designated RIPTA bus stop? Or maybe you're a frustrated local who crosses your fingers each time you drive into downtown Newport, hoping that you'll find a parking spot that won't ultimately leave you with a parking ticket or your car towed.

These are the kinds of transportation challenges that island residents and tourists alike face each day, particularly during the summer.

A workshop Thursday evening at City Hall explored these issues with the help of Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, which invited local residents to attend and provide input.

With July being declared "Alternate Transportation Month," by the City Council, such meetings are being held to discuss parking and traffic problems - and potential solutions - on the island, particularly in Newport.

Thursday's meeting featured large-scale maps of Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth for attendees to see where bike racks and bus-stop benches currently are located, and to discuss where extras may be needed. Areas such as the Long Wharf Mall were mentioned as being in need of bike racks, and several side streets in downtown Newport were singled out as being in need of benches for people to use while waiting for the bus.

If the proposed improvements are approved, the planning commission and City Council plan to apply for a grant from the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority to implement them.

"All (three towns) have the ability to submit proposals to say what they think are our needs here," said Paige Bronk, Newport's planning director. "Hopefully we can package this and submit it to RIPTA."

What began as a meeting to discuss bicycle parking and bus route benches evolved into a wave of other pressing transportation dilemmas that local residents took the opportunity to bring up.

"There are no places to park," said Russell Pedro of Newport. "People park in spots they're not

supposed to and it'll only get worse."

Pedro owns a scooter and attended the meeting in hopes to bring awareness of the fact that scooter and motorcycle parking is lacking in the city.

Residents and members of the City Council and island-wide planning commission brainstormed ideas to ease the problem.

Pedro proposed: Why not paint lines along the street curbs or in parking lots for scooters and motorcycles?

Encouraging people to ride scooters or bicycles would result in less traffic congestion, meaning more parking slots would be available, proponents said. The alternative modes of transportation also provide an enjoyable way to take in the local scenery, they said - and with all of this would come more business for nearby shops because of the ease that would accompany traveling in the area.

Hopping on a scooter or peddling around the narrow and often busy streets can be beneficial in more than one way, proponents said.

With the compact size of scooters and bicycles, riders are able to zip through traffic, squeeze into narrow parking spots, and pay a lower amount of money for gas (or get a workout, in the case of a bicycle).

"The scooter phenomenon is big," Bronk said. "They're everywhere here and I think this needs to be a focus."

The idea of promoting walking in the city also was discussed as a way to reduce vehicle traffic.

One local resident also proposed the idea of designating a day to ride bikes to individuals' destinations.

"Traffic and parking are big problems and anything we can do to mitigate these is a good thing," said Ned Draper, director of administrative services for the city of Newport.