Wauwatosans bike-commute through winter's worst

Winter weather does not deter Kevin Hardman from biking from his Wauwatosa home to his workplace in downtown Milwaukee. Photo By C.T. Kruger

Watching Wauwatosan Kevin Hardman's morning routine, you might think he was a professional snowboarder. But it's just how he gears up for his daily commute to a desk job in downtown Milwaukee.

Over his regular office attire, Harman pulls on an extra layer of socks, heavy boots, a waterproof jacket, a snowboarding helmet and ski goggles. The blustery journey ahead of him is familiar to several Wauwatosans who are committed to choosing bicycles over vehicles for their commutes even through subzero temperatures.

"There's a Scandinavian expression, which I'll paraphrase: 'There's no such thing as bad weather, just inappropriate clothing or equipment,'" Hardman said. "People are often amazed to hear that somebody would ride their bike in temperatures like this, but I've found you just get the right equipment and you can ride very comfortably."

Making the trek

For Hardman, the ride winds through the Washington Highlands and Washington Heights neighborhoods down to Wells Street, which he follows through the Marquette campus to his downtown office near Cathedral Square.

Meanwhile, fellow Wauwatosan Steve Long pedals farther south to Miller Park, where he hops on the Hank Aaron State Trail, which runs along Canal Street and takes him nearly all the way to Marquette University, where he teaches. From the trail, he just has to head north under Interstate 94 — often a satisfying moment.

"I look at all the cars just stalled there," Long said.
Part of the reason Long said he chooses to bike to work is the environmental impact.

"I'm conscious of the fact that the automobile is not a sustainable form of transportation," Long said. "And I like the way the bicycle shows you the world in a different way. It's like you're part of the scenery rather than just looking at it from a distance."

Even on the coldest days, he and other cyclists say they just prefer the experience of being on a bike because of the opportunity for physical activity and mental reflection. And without traffic to slow them down, they often reach their destinations faster by bike than by car.

"I really enjoy cycling," said Wauwatosan Mark Freund, who rides to Johnson Controls downtown. "It's a way to get exercise without taking more time out of my day."

**Weighing the cost**

One of the major barriers to the cycling lifestyle, they acknowledge, is cost. Studded tires, which aren't necessary but go a long way for stability in the winter, will likely run you more than $50 a piece. Another oft-recommended product, bar mitts to keep your hands warm on the handle bars, cost about $75.

For even more traction in the snow, **cyclists are increasingly choosing to get wide-tired "fat bikes,"** which generally cost more than $1,000.

But cyclists point out that the investment in cycling equipment often pays off because of what they're not spending on car maintenance and gas.

"When gas is $2 a gallon, people think we are crazy," Freund said. "When it's $4 a gallon, people think we're the smartest people on Earth."

Despite the commitment and grit demanded for winter biking, Hardman said he thinks more people might enjoy it if they tried it.
"What I do is not exotic," Hardman said. "I'm just riding my bike, and anybody can ride a bike."

Hardman is the executive director of **Bublr Bikes**, which recently launched bike-share stations in Milwaukee. He hopes the stations, **coming soon to Wauwatosa**, will encourage more people to experiment with bicycle commutes.

"The first pedal is the hardest," Hardman said. "Once you try it out, I think you'll find you can do it comfortably and safely."

For more recommendations on how to bike through the Wisconsin winter, check out the blog post, "**How Low Can You Go? Commuting at -8 Degrees**," by Dave Schlabowske, deputy director of the Wisconsin Bike Fed.