

Bike tour focuses on Austin's history, architecture – AustinTalks

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October 5th, 2010

Between its tucked-away, historic mansions, sprawling town hall and rows of home-grown workers cottages, Austin is full of architectural gems.

On Oct. 9, a bike tour led by a Chicago real estate agent will educate Chicagoans on some of the West Side neighborhood's most notable treasures.

Realtor Lee Diamond started leading bike tours in 2008 as a way to promote cycling and his real estate agency, [Big Shoulders Realty](#). He's now created and led tours in 19 Chicago neighborhoods.

But while the tours are organized by a real estate agency, they aren't sales gimmicks, Diamond says; participants aren't taken on a tour of for-sale signs or taken on walk-throughs of open houses.

Instead, the tours are a way to promote interest in different Chicago communities, he said.

"We're not talking about what homes are for sale," he said. "We're just talking about the history of the community."

Saturday's tour will be the second one of its kind in Austin. The first time, 144 bikers criss-crossed the neighborhood in May 2009, Diamond said, making it the second-largest turnout in the history of the tours.

Participants stopped at sites like the Gothic Cicero Township Fire and Police Station at 439 N. Waller Ave.; Columbus Park's Council Ring, a series of rounded limestone benches installed by park planner Jens Jensen; and an array of stately mansions and Prairie-style homes. (For a complete list of sites visited on Diamond's Austin tour, [click here](#).)

"(Austin has) an incredible amount of things to see and impressive buildings, like Austin Town Hall and one of the oldest fire stations in the city of Chicago," Diamond said. "When I take people through, they have no idea that kind of thing was in Chicago."

This time around, the turnout for the tour is likely to be far smaller – a few dozen, Diamond guesses. That's because while he used to offer the tours for free, they got so big and required so much planning that he began to charge – \$25 per person with advance registration, \$30 the day of.

Melody Geraci, a spokeswoman for the [Active Transportation Alliance](#), a biking advocacy group that co-sponsors the tours, said Diamond's bike tours are unique because they are designed not for tourists but for Chicagoans.

"The bike tours, from our perspective, are an opportunity to explore areas of Chicago that folks maybe would not have considered a destination or a useable route," Geraci said. "There are many, many bikable places in Chicago that are secrets, and this is a way to open those doors."

There's also a deeper story behind the Austin tour that Diamond wants to share. The tour points to a glowing past – a time when Austin was considered a desirable place to live, a place where developers rolled out beautiful homes, touting the neighborhood's easy train access to downtown.

"It's one of my favorite neighborhoods in Chicago. It's also sort of an illustration of sort of what's wrong in Chicago, what we prioritize," Diamond said. "It's got the opportunity to be a great story of redemption, but right now . . . It helps you realize how great it once was, and what a priority it once was."

Big Shoulders Realty's Austin tour will begin at 1 p.m. Saturday at Columbus Park, 500 S. Central Ave. Participants should bring their own bikes. For more information on this or other tours, visit www.bigshouldersrealty.com/tours.

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