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Bike tours take homebuyers off the beaten path

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The Active Transportation Alliance is in the business of promoting bicycling, walking and public transportation, but next month it's venturing into the suburban housing market.

In an experiment it hopes to take elsewhere, the alliance is working with Oak Park, Homewood and real estate agents in those two communities to promote the idea of buying a home in a rideable, walkable town. And what better way to do that than have folks pedal around the community.

The idea of combining house-hunting and bicycling slowly has been gaining traction here and in other cities. Last year, Prudential Rubloff Properties agent Eric Rojas organized a bike tour of single-family homes in Ravenswood, and while he didn't close any sales as a result of the tour, he's considering doing a bike tour of condos this year, possibly in East Lakeview. For the third year in a row, Big Shoulders Realty in Chicago is conducting monthly bike tours that are focused on architectural preservation and showing off different city neighborhoods. Its agents also will show properties via bicycle.

"It's the best way to see a neighborhood," said Lee Diamond of Big Shoulders. "You've got the good, the bad, the ugly. You see if you feel comfortable, if you're in the right environment. I've had numerous people asking me housing questions on our ride, and I'll tell them I'll happily talk to them after our ride."

The target market for the suburban events is people who may be ready to leave the city for the suburbs but think they need a car not just to get there, but to live there.

That was the initial worry of Pamela Brookstein, a member of the alliance who's organizing the Oak Park tour and moved to the near west suburb a dozen years ago. "We actually looked for our first home by bike," she said. "We wanted to make sure it was a bikeable, walkable community. We were leaving the city, which I was hesitant to do. I had a view of a suburb as being a place where you needed to drive around."

Twelve years later, she's found out that isn't the case and she, the village, its business owners and real estate agents hope to convince other city dwellers of the same thing. On June 13, ride participants will receive a map and a list of more than 70 open houses in Oak Park that day. Local merchants are participating too, offering coupons and discounts for stores and restaurants to people who visit at least four open houses.

Meanwhile, on June 19 in south suburban Homewood, a maximum of 50 bicyclists will be taken in small groups on a guided tour of about five homes in the community that three years ago affirmed its commitment to creating a bicycle-friendly environment. After the hosted home tours, participants are invited to lunch at the Homewood Art and Garden Street Fair.

Organizers of both events see them as a chance to show off not just homes but how easy it is to get around on one's



own power or via public transportation in some suburbs. "I'm not looking at it as a way to show off houses as much as I am to show people they can use their bicycles a little more," said Greg Byron, an agent at Re/Max South Suburban who used to own a bicycle shop in Homewood. "These are bicycle-friendly communities down here."

In the current challenging real estate market, events like the bike tours show how organizations are thinking outside the box. No one expects bike home tours to catch on in every suburb but to some real estate agents, as well as the Active Transportation Alliance, it seems like a natural fit for those communities that have sprouted along commuter train lines and where there is density, not suburban sprawl.

"This is going to be an interesting trial," Brookstein said. "Twelve years ago, talking about bicycling was really fringe. Today people don't bat an eye nearly as much as they used to."

Added Steve Buchtel, the alliance's south suburban coordinator who came up with the idea, "This event is designed to tell people to choose very carefully where you decide to set down roots."

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