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Sunday, September 11, 2005

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South Portland Greenbelt winds through busy city, fields

By MELISSA KIM

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With so much written in this newspaper about the South Portland Greenbelt, I'd just assumed that most people know about this neat multiuse trail. But a few conversations with local cyclists made me realize that not everyone realizes that there's a paved bike path winding through green fields and leafy woods right in the heart of busy SoPo. So I figure it's my turn to spread the word.

I rode the trail recently in the spirit of field testing my new bike trailer. My goal was to find a paved, off-road path where my 1-year-old son and I could ride for about an hour. So I set out from Bug Light Park. To get here, drive all the way down Broadway, turn left at the end onto Pickett Street, and follow signs to Bug Light Park. The park is open from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. There are lots of interesting things to look at while you're here, from gigantic tankers to the Portland skyline to a monument and display detailing the history of South Portland's shipyards.

Set out on the trail, following the access road you drove in on. At 0.5 miles, as the road swings left, look for the yellow Harbor Walk Trail signs straight across the road. Here's where you strike out off-road, riding through the back of everything - back yards, the rear entrance to the Betsy Ross House, the back side of a tank farm.

There are five road crossings in about a mile, and a pair of wooden posts at each crossing. Bicyclists will need good bike-handling skills to ride in between the posts; I had to slow to a walk to make sure the bike trailer would make it.

There's a nice stretch along the edge of Mill Cove and the back of the Hannaford supermarket. Plenty of shorebirds hang out here, and it's nicer at high tide than at muddy low tide. You'll need to cross busy Cottage Road, ride through pleasant Mill Creek Park, then cross even busier Ocean Street. Now you're riding behind a shopping plaza at the foot of the Portland-South Portland Bridge. There's an extremely difficult intersection with two road crossings and traffic lights that don't seem to make

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pedestrians a priority.

So far it doesn't sound too peaceful, does it? It's about to get better. After the bridge, there's a kiosk for the East Coast Greenway and the Eastern Trail Alliance, outlining plans to create a multiuse trail from Maine to Florida. Now you're riding more or less parallel to Broadway, with views of Fore River on the right. At Mile 2.8, you'll have a very short section on the road, riding on Chestnut Street and North Kelsey Street. Then you're quickly back on the trail, riding alongside railroad tracks and past a pond.

There's another ugly intersection where you have to cross Broadway and Evans, awkward with a trailer in tow, but then the trail really rewards. Suddenly it's all green and leafy, with birds chirping, Barberry Creek babbling alongside and, finally, no more of those wooden posts and road crossings.

After a lovely mile or so, you emerge into a vast field, marred only by candy-cane shaped pipes and signs telling you it's a covered landfill. Best not to know, perhaps? Fields bordered by woods continue and you'll pass another information kiosk as you come to ball fields, an exercise trail and big red field house, part of the Wainwright Recreation Complex, South Portland's shiny new recreational facility.

If you don't mind riding on the road, you can keep going, following the Eastern Trail/East Coast Greenway signs. Ride on Highland Avenue all the way to Route 207, where you can then enjoy the new bridge that crosses Scarborough Marsh.

Otherwise, turn around and head back to Bug Light for a round trip ride of approximately 12 miles. If you only want a quiet, pretty, paved, off-road ride, then begin at Wainwright and ride to Broadway and back. That's only a four-mile trip, but might be perfect for little kids, seniors, beginner cyclists or people towing trailers.

If you'd like to support the group that helped make this trail possible, then join the Eastern Trail Alliance's Trail-A-Thon 2005 on Saturday. Choose from one of three guided rides, all starting at Bug Light Park and riding along the Greenbelt. There's a 12-mile family ride, a 35-mile intermediate ride and a 75-mile ride to Biddeford Pool and back. Registration is \$25 (\$30 on the day of the ride). Call 284-9260 or visit the Web site: www.easterntail.org/lthouse05.html.

FREE-WHEELING

n The 14th annual MaineShare Hike & Bike at Bradbury Mountain State Park in Pownal takes place Sept. 18. There are three guided rides you can choose from, ranging from a 15-mile family ride to a 62-mile scenic tour of Pownal, Durham, South Freeport and Brunswick, as well as a mountain bike ride on the park's excellent trails. There is a minimum \$60 pledge. Call MaineShare at 622-0105 or visit the Web site: www.maineshare.org.

n Bicycle Coalition of Maine's Tour de Trails series, designed to introduce people to some of Maine's nicest mountain biking trails, finishes the season with a tour of the little-known Kennebec Highlands in the Belgrade Lakes region. This is a great chance to get a free guided tour in this 5,000-plus acre wildlife conservation area. There's a 10-mile intermediate and 18-mile

advanced ride. Call BCM at 623-4511 or visit the Web site:
www.bikemaine.org.

Melissa Kim, a free-lance writer in Portland, is the author of "New England Biking: 100 of the Best Road and Trail Rides" (Foghorn Outdoors/Avalon Travel Publishing). She welcomes comments at: bikes@melissakim.com

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