

New, unique bike shop to open up in South End

■ By Bill Christianson
News Editor

South End youths who are tired of trudging to school or their favorite park by foot can work for a new pair of wheels, thanks to a new, unique bicycle shop that will open in Columbia City sometime this month.

If youths are willing to get your hands greasy, spend some time adjusting the brakes and patching up flat tire tubes, they can have their very own BMX bike to ride thanks to the Free Ride Zone.

The Free Ride Zone is opening up this community-outreach bike shop at 3709 S. Ferdinand St.

The group purchased a store-front house kitty-corner from Orca Elementary School, according to Suzanne Carlson, president of the Free Ride Zone, a group of community activists and bicycle enthusiasts.

"You see kids riding huge 10-speeds, straddling the top bar,

because they don't have their own bikes," Carlson said. "There's not even a bike shop in the neighborhood."

The Free Ride Zone is not your average bike shop.

Its goal is to reach out to the community while providing safe, reliable bicycles to area youths, Carlson said. The Free Ride Zone will have four "dynamic" bicycle programs at its shop, according to Carlson:

- Earn-a-bike program: Youth ages 8 to 18 learn hands-on bicycle repair and riding skills while earning a bike of their own;

- Vocational education: Older youths learn the basics of running their own small bike repair shop;

- Neighborhood rides: All participants, young and old, get to ride their new bikes and celebrate their hard work; and

- Redistribution program: Recycled bikes are available for the community at affordable prices or in exchange for service. The shop also will repair and distribute

a fleet of free loaner bikes for residents to ride around the area. David Mozer, a member of the board and a Beacon Hill resident,

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said the bike shop is not a business in the classic sense.

"We use the bike shop as an educational tool," said Mozer, who takes his daughter to day care on his bike. Mozer said the bike shop will sell accessories and bike parts, but there won't be a wide variety.

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In conjunction with Powerful

Schools, a nonprofit educational outreach program that provides after-school classes at various schools in the South End, the Free Ride Zone conducted a pilot bicycle repair class for students of John Muir Elementary School in May.

Greg Tuke, executive director of Powerful Schools, was excited when he heard that the Free Ride Zone wanted to open up a shop.

"There isn't much of a bike presence in the area," Tuke said. "There is a big need here for bicycle shops."

Many of the kids did not even know how to ride a bike at first, Tuke said. But that changed in a matter of weeks.

The pilot project was an eight-week course, in which students learned everything from fixing flat tires to replacing bearings and brakes. The John Muir students repaired eight bicycles and then gave them to the school's gym class.

"Every time we rolled out our bikes at John Muir, we had kids flocking around wanting to ride them," Carlson said.

The Free Ride Zone is modeled after about a dozen successful programs already in operation across the United States, including Portland, Ore.

At first, the board members looked for a location in Capitol Hill; however Mozer really lobbied to move the location to the South End because of the lack of bicycle use.

"I was surprised that they wanted to move [to the South End]," Mozer said.

Carlson said the location is perfect and the community response for the shop has been outstanding.

"We really like the location," she said. "It is in the business district, but it is tucked away from a lot of car traffic."

"The community has been supportive of the program. We hope to become a presence in the area and reach out to the kids."