

Yoga, dancing, jogging to replace cars at Oklahoma City's Open Streets event

Oklahoma City's Open Streets initiative will shut down NW 23 Street to encourage physical activity.

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The Uptown Merchants Association has spent weeks preparing for Sunday's Open Streets festival, including hosting a volunteer clean-up of the busy corridor. Photo provided.



Uptown's NW 23 corridor, one of the city's busiest urban thoroughfares, will shut down Sunday as people take over the street with bikes, yoga mats and skateboards.

"Open Streets," an initiative in cities across the country, is being launched in Oklahoma City by a coalition that includes the Oklahoma City/County Health Department, the Uptown 23rd Merchants Association, Spokies, Integris, the Lynn Institute, Oklahoma City University, the Oklahoma City Barons, the Oklahoma City Energy (soccer team), the Association of Central Oklahoma Governments (ACOG), METRO Transit/Embark, ASTEC Charter Schools, NewView Oklahoma and the OKC Boathouse Foundation.

"It started last summer as a conversation with the Wellness Now partnership, ACOG and myself," said Kristin Culver, Wellness Now supervisor. "We were talking about Open Street initiatives across the country that were really starting to pick up steam as ways to generate interest in public transportation, physical activity, while also promoting local businesses and building up civic pride."

Culver said she and another Wellness Now coordinator attended national training on Open Streets in Minneapolis at a time when that city was hosting an event along a three-mile stretch.

"There's never been anything quite like it in Oklahoma," Culver said. "So the idea is you temporarily close streets to traffic so they can be used for anything – walking, jogging, biking, dancing – anything that is human powered. The intent is to create a car-free public space where communities can connect, families and friends can play, and businesses can engage the public."

Kurt Shewmaker, director of restaurant management for A Good Egg Dining Group and president of the Uptown 23rd Merchants Association, said the Open Streets event is well timed as the district is seeking to deal with parking and traffic issues.

The street was a dead zone just five years ago, but following the opening of Big Truck Tacos, an array of restaurants, bars and shops have opened in renovated buildings making NW 23 the newest urban entertainment corridor in Oklahoma City.

"We're attacking things like parking, walkability, transportation and how the neighborhoods fit in with the businesses," Shewmaker said.

Culver said NW 23 was an easy pick for the state's first Open Streets event.

"There are a lot of exciting developments along 23rd we want to highlight and be a part of and build some pride around, and we want to give people a chance to explore the historic neighborhoods around this area," Culver said.

The event, which will run noon to 4 p.m. Sunday, will be held along three different zones between Robinson and Western Avenues. At least 10 food trucks will be a part of the festival, and all have pledged to include healthy menu items. Shops and businesses also have pledged to offer physical activities for guests.

To encourage the use of public transportation and walking, free shuttles will be provided for those who choose to park at remote lots at Byron's Liquor, NW 23 and Broadway; American Fidelity Assurance Co., 2000 N Classen; and the south parking lot of the state Capitol just south of NW 23 and Lincoln.

Only one disagreement is apparent between the Uptown merchants and the Wellness Now coalition; whether the event will return to NW 23 next year.

"We plan to move it to different sectors of the city every year," Culver said. "The wellness coalition's goal is to encourage health, so we want to reach all over Oklahoma City and Oklahoma County."

That news, Shewmaker said, was a disappointment for Uptown.

"We are excited about this event," Shewmaker said. "If it goes really well, we might do something on a similar scale ourselves right here on 23rd. We're proud of the momentum we have here and we want to show it off."