

Plenty of drivers along for the ride

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They drive the FreeWheel route every day, providing help and encouragement to bicyclists.

PONCA CITY -- Driving a SAG wagon isn't an easy endeavor, but it's a job that's vital for the bicyclists who are traversing the state on the Oklahoma FreeWheel.

"You have to pitch the tents and look for shade and find the bathrooms and showers and get everyone's bags -- and I got lost more than once," said Diana Lerma of Edmond, the personal driver Friday for the Oklahoma Bicyclists Society.

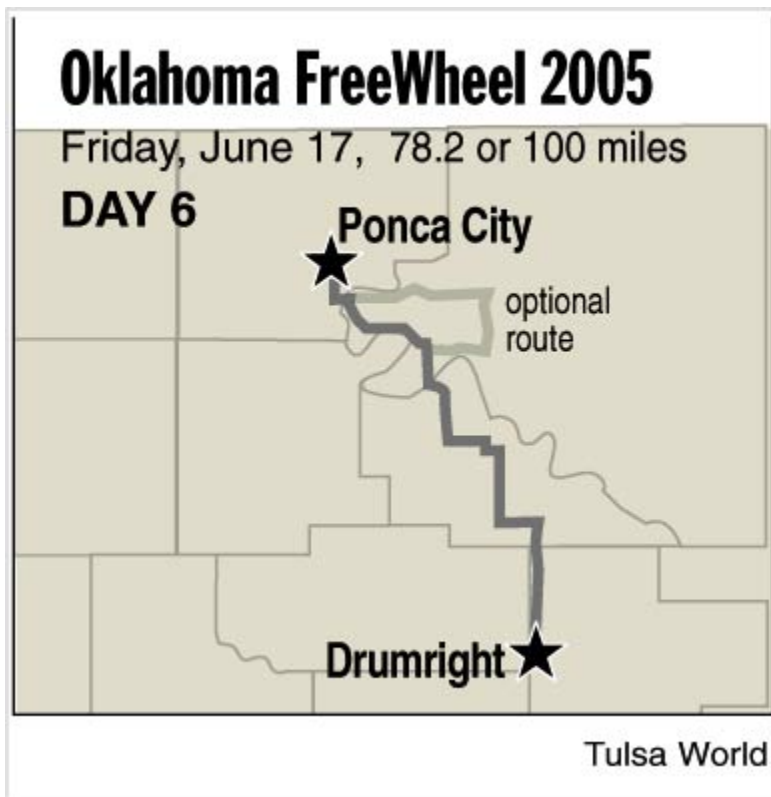
The group's members take turns driving the SAG -- or Support and Gear -- truck, and Lerma had biked the previous five days of the cross-state trip.

"I like biking better," she said. "SAGing's harder."

Hauling water coolers and setting up tents, these are the people who make FreeWheelers more safe and comfortable.

Each year, some people join FreeWheel as official SAG drivers, and others follow along as personal drivers.

The official SAGs travel alongside the bikers, stopping by the road to offer cold water, first aid and emergency aid.



Some FreeWheelers, such as those in the Oklahoma Bicyclists Society, have the luxury of a personal SAG who drives straight to the campground each morning, getting everything set up for the bikers in his or her group.

Edna Schultz, another driver for Lerma's group, said it's even more difficult to drive an official FreeWheel SAG than to be a personal driver.

"You have to sit on the side of the road. You try to find a shady spot, but it's hot, and you have to stay out there for a long time until everyone's done," she said. "It's a lot harder than people think."

Gary Pershall, a biker from Yukon, spoke of his gratitude to the SAG drivers -- one man in particular.

"This guy -- his name's Dennis -- brings his

own canopy and sets it up about 15 to 20 miles out from the beginning, when you really need a break," Pershall said. "He has water, Gatorade, food and even two Port-A-Potties for everyone, and he pays for it all himself."

Pershall said people like Dennis are vital to the riders in case dehydration, flat tires or other problems arise.

Stephen Cargill of Shidler is a driver for his wife, who is biking. Although he rode in FreeWheel in the past, he said he enjoys his new job as a driver.

"I'm just here to support my wife. This is her week," he said. "She puts up with me 51 weeks out of the year, so I want to be here for her this week."

While at a campsite in Antlers early in the trip, Cargill met a fellow driver while they each set up tents. His camping neighbor, James Underwood of Edmond, joined Cargill for a round of golf, and the two instantly became friends.

"We've figured out the best deal. We wake up every morning and drive to the next place, set up the tents, get everything ready, and then when (the bikers) get here and want to take their afternoon naps, we go play golf," Cargill said.

Underwood is traveling with his daughter and son-in-law as their personal SAG, but he said he misses riding his bike on FreeWheel.

"I rode once with my daughter, and even though I'm happy doing this, I'd like to ride again," he said.

One of the official Freewheel SAG drivers is Diana Enns, who came from Kansas to support her bicyclist husband.

The cyclists appreciate her, Enns said, because of what she offers them.

"If I didn't have the water and Band-Aids, they wouldn't love me, but I do, so they love me," she said confidently.

The cyclists and their entourages traveled Friday from Drumright to Ponca City. FreeWheel started Sunday in Paris, Texas, and will end Saturday in Caldwell, Kan.

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