

Richmond dedicates mountain bike course on Belle Isle

Michael Martz | Posted: Saturday, September 29, 2012 3:30 pm

Mountain bikers come in all sizes and skills on Richmond's Belle Isle.

They also come as families.

While Miles Amey, 4, and Logan Amey, 6, rode the humps and curves of a newly christened skills course for mountain bikers, their 2-year-old brother, Mason, watched astride his scoot bike.

The brothers and their South Richmond family were far from alone, as dozens of children and teenagers treated themselves to their own kind of roller-coaster Saturday morning at the dedication of the Belle Isle Bike Skills Training Area.

"It just doesn't get any better than this," said Nathan Burrell, trails manager for the Richmond Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities.

Burrell was the manager for building the skills course beneath the Lee Bridge, using mostly recycled city materials and volunteer labor for a project that was low on cost and high on value.

"It's projects like this that bring the community together and that really show what we are capable of in the city of Richmond," he said after the dedication ceremony, which drew more than 50 adults and children.

The skills course was built through a partnership between Richmond's parks and public works departments and the Richmond area chapter of the Mid-Atlantic Off-Road Enthusiasts, or RA-MORE, which contributed \$15,000 and more than 500 hours of volunteer labor.

The partnership also received a big boost from the International Mountain Bicycling Association, which designed the course with RA-MORE, as well as nonprofit groups and private companies.

The skills course was built with repurposed materials such as clay from city cemeteries, sand from beneath a seasonal downtown ice-skating rink and massive granite boulders that once backed the locks of Kanawha Canal.

"This is a very, very unique park," said Norman C. Merrifield, parks director.

The course provides an opportunity for aspiring mountain bikers to learn basic skills in a safe setting, as well as experienced riders to hone their abilities within sight of some of the country's most celebrated urban trails.

"This place is so perfect because it's in the city," said Matthew Browne, a Henrico County resident

who balanced his bike on a boulder by its front wheel to practice for mountain bike trials that require maneuvering on an obstacle course without setting foot on ground.

"This is about access," said RA-MORE President Greg Rollins, who helped conceive the project more than a year ago and complete it by Memorial Day.

Since the course's "soft opening" in late spring, Burrell said the city has seen a surge in families coming onto the island for biking and other activities, as well as a corresponding drop in trash and bad behavior from other park users.

It's a welcome change to Richmond City Council President Kathy C. Graziano, a parks booster who hugged Burrell after the dedication.

"This is fabulous!" Graziano exclaimed.