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Walk Wise, Drive Smart offers guided walks in town

By Meg Hale
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During the coldest days of winter, the Walk Wise, Drive Smart group has more than 20 people taking part in its monthly strolls. And the group is simultaneously doing everything it can to improve walking conditions for pedestrians here.

In addition to guided bird walks and a guided tours of the historical sites such as Druid Hills and Hyman Heights, Walk Wise hosts a series of Wintertime Lakeside Strolls in the most-walkable neighborhoods in town such as Haywood Knolls, Hyman Heights, and Jackson Park.

The next stroll is scheduled for 1:30 p.m. Thursday at the Patton Park parking lot said Walk Wise Project Manager Catherine Raymond.

The stroll will be through the Druid Hills. While the strolls are geared toward the more than 31 percent of Hendersonville that is 65 years old or older, they are open to anybody who wants to attend.

Raymond said she would love to see grandparents attend the strolls with their grandchildren.

"Keep the older people as fit as they are and start the kids at a younger age," she said.

A Hendersonville native, Raymond said the monthly strolls were started last fall as a means "to get the word out" about the Walk Wise program and what they are trying to accomplish, and of course, "to encourage people to get out and walk."

Her job is to search out senior-friendly routes in Hendersonville, focusing on aspects such as walkway quality, lighting and traffic.

She also works with city planners and workers to improve these areas for walkers and bikers. She added that Walk Wise is already working on mapping areas.

Walk Wise hosts Active Aging Week in September, neighborhood safety meetings and educational workshops such as Car Fit, a class for senior drivers sponsored by the AARP Foundation.

The Monthly Wintertime Strolls are sponsored by Walk Wise, Drive Smart, along with the Environmental and Conservation Organization, which is funded by a grant from UNC-Chapel Hill and the N.C. Highway Safety Research Center.

Raymond, who had recently returned from a trip to Germany, said she was struck by how accessible the roads in Europe are for pedestrians.

"Everything is optimized for bike-riders and people who are walking places. They really are the priority there and I'm sure we could do that here."

She said Walk Wise is ideal for Hendersonville.

"The cheapest form of exercise is to walk out your door. You're aware of what's going on in your community, you're part of your community," Raymond said. "You notice if there's a problem. There is a sense of belonging not only to your neighborhood, but your neighborhood belongs to you."
