

Open streets, open fun

Carrboro festival to host workshops, classes, raffles and recreation

By Faima Ramirez

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In the 1970s, Bogotá, Colombia, started an event called “Ciclovía,” in which they shut off a portion of their main streets to cars for hours at a time on Sundays and holidays in an effort to give their community a gathering space for activities and simply coming together. And now Carrboro is having one of its own.

After a January unanimous vote of approval from Carrboro Board of Aldermen, the town will close one of its main streets to cars and open it to bikes and pedestrians for half a day.

West Weaver Street between North Greensboro Street and Elm Street will host the first Ciclovía or “open streets” event in Carrboro Saturday between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. Additionally, some activities will be held on the loop between Oak Avenue, Lindsay Street and East Poplar Avenue, including bike-fixing workshops, Zumba classes, a climbing wall and helmet decoration sessions.

In July 2012, the Carrboro Bicycle Coalition won a Better Bicycling



The inaugural Bull City Open Streets took place as a part of the 2011 Durham Earth Day Festival celebrations. The event, which has been repeated on several occasions since, takes place on the streets around the Durham Farmer’s Market and Durham Central Park. (Photo courtesy of Bull City Open Streets Facebook page).

Community Grant from Performance Bicycle, for the sole purpose of conducting an open streets event.

“The goal for Open Streets Carrboro has been, from day one, to recreate the streets,” says Eric Allman, member of the coalition. “To think how we can

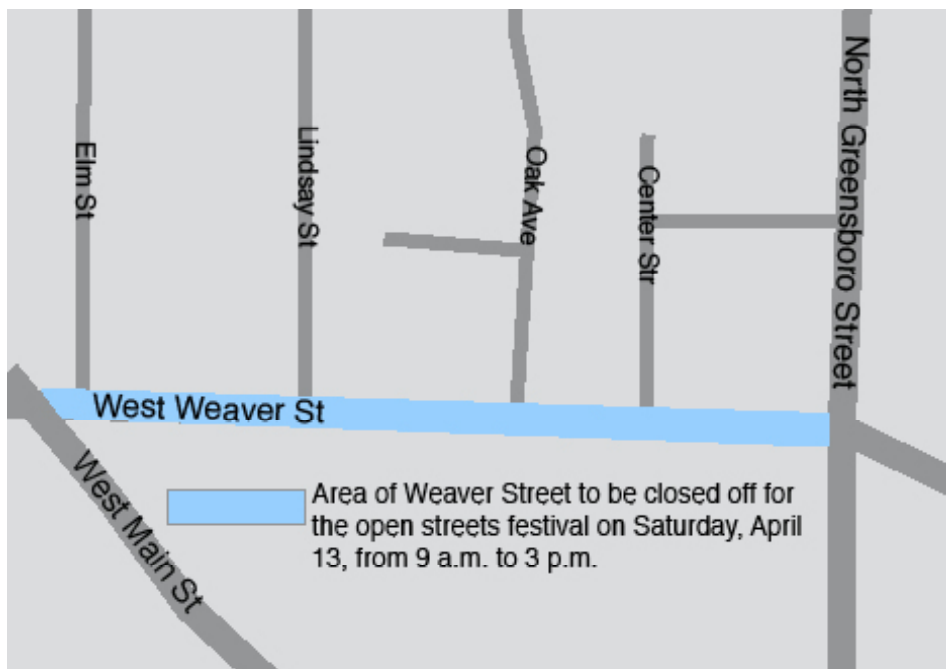
use that space differently for transportation, activities, community involvement and community building.”

Allman explains that open street events started as an effort to improve the community by giving people a space where they could get together and partake in activities. Every Sunday and holiday, up to 2 million people in Bogotá converge on a 70-mile stretch of road free of cars where they are able to bike, run, walk and enjoy life.

The initiative picked up in the United States in the last decade and now cities like Chicago and San Francisco have weekly “open streets” events. Closer by, Durham has hosted two of these events.

The Carrboro Bicycle coalition is a non-profit group created four years ago as a response to Carrboro’s Bicycle Master Plan to improve its bicycle infrastructure. In 2011, Carrboro became one of two cities in the southeast to receive a silver level status as a Bicycle Friendly City from The League of American Bicyclist organization.

“The board is very excited about the event,” Michelle Johnson, member of the Carrboro Board of Aldermen said.





Stephan Grabner, 23, is one of the many locals that enjoy the first days of Spring on biking lanes in Carrboro. In 2011, Carrboro became one of two cities in the southeast to receive a silver level status as a Bicycle Friendly City from The League of American Bicyclist organization. (Staff photo by Faima Ramirez).

Three of six aldermen council members on Carrboro’s board are volunteering at the Open Streets event. Johnson will teach a yoga lesson and Jacquelyn M. Gist and Damon Seils will help in some capacity, Allman said.

“This has been talked about (for) several years, but no one has \$3,000 to drop on a community event for four hours,” Allman said. “It hasn’t happened before because there hasn’t been anyone to take charge and it takes a lot of time and energy.”

The coalition intends to provide the Town of Carrboro with the \$3,000 grant in order to cover costs associated with closing West Weaver Street. Johnson explains that the high costs of closing streets in town are associated with placing barricades and staffing additional people to redirect traffic and for people’s security.

According to its website, the Town of Carrboro requires a public hearing for all street closing permit applications. According to Allman and Johnson, many Carrboro residents favored the initiative at a public hearing held on Jan. 29.

“There was no single person that came and said, ‘no, we don’t want this,’” Allman said. “Carrboro is more of a ‘sure we can do it’ town instead of ‘no we can’t.’”

The only concerns involved logistics, including deciding which day of the weekend to host the event, which side of the street to close to traffic and how to overlap it with the Carrboro Farmers’ Market.

“We talked to the managers of the farmers’ market and they actually wanted it on Saturday because they thought it may benefit them,” Allman said. The activities are set up so that people walk down West Weaver Street towards the Carrboro Town Commons where the market is located.

Johnson said that the coalition approached most of the local businesses downtown to hear their concerns about the event.

“Most businesses are closed on Saturdays, and the ones that are open are participating or sponsoring the event,” Johnson said, “It is going to generate traffic for local businesses.”

Weaver Street Market will provide food for a bike-powered smoothie-maker and the ReCYCLERY Collective will help people repair their bikes.

“We really tried to include something for everybody. We don’t have a specific group in mind,” Allman said.

Organizers have adopted many strategies for promoting this event. They have employed the use of social media, word of mouth, and fliers hung up at churches, community centers, tiendas and apartment complexes.

The town’s report on the event says that between 500 and 800 people are expected to attend the event in addition to more than 45 volunteers that have signed up to work on either of the two shifts.

“They have been mindful to have a diverse group of folks involved in this event,” Johnson said.

Maria Hitt, coordinator of the Carrboro Growing Healthy Kids

Gardens, said she thinks the event is a great idea but that it’s always chal-

lenging to bring all sectors of the community together. “The town has to figure out how to make these events attractive and welcoming to the Latino, Burmese, Korean and African-American low-income communities,” Hitt said.

Hitt suggests that the organizers advertise in different languages and engage these populations in the planning like letting some of the younger Hispanic residents DJ at the event.

Hitt says that in her experience at the gardens, it has been relatively easy to get the Latino and Korean residents excited about community events.

However, she said she’s had problems making African-American families feel welcomed.

“There is a lot of misunderstanding. Racism goes in all directions,” she said. Hitt argues that language barriers and cultural prejudices between Hispanics and African American make it difficult to get them to talk to each other.

“I think this event is an opportunity for residents to come out and meet their neighbors and sharing space,” Johnson said.

Allman says that he hopes that Open Streets Carrboro will help create an experience that will become a regular event that encourages an active and healthy lifestyle for the entire community.



Michelle Johnson who has been on Carrboro’s Board of Aldermen for a year, said she is very excited about the first Open Streets Event in Carrboro. (Photo courtesy of Heba Salama Photography).

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*-Eric Allman,
Carrboro Bicycle Coalition*