

Greater Wilmington Business

New shop offers unusual way to get around

By Gwynne Moore

Offering a new kind of entertainment for ages 0 to 99, Wheel Fun Rentals opened its first North Carolina franchise in mid-June with locations in downtown Wilmington and Carolina Beach.

Business has already exceeded expectations, said owner Duke Hagestrom. "We had a Holiday weekend that was fabulous," he said. "I'm really pleased.

Along with the usual two-wheelers and tandem bikes, true family-style fun comes in the form of colorful four-wheeled cycles called Surreys and three-wheeled Deuce Coupes and Choppers. Quad Sports, resembling go-carts, are equipped with Formula One steering and coaster brakes. Considered bicycles, these self-propelled vehicles cruise downtown streets, attracting a lot of attention, smiles and waves.

A family of six or eight can rent a Double Surrey for \$30 an hour. "It's a wonderful family activity," Hagestrom said. "You've got the little ones in the front basket, the adults and the older kids riding or pedaling in the back. They go out for an hour or two and have a great time together.

"They have fun. They ring the bell. They laugh. They come back with giant smiles on their

faces."

A Single Surrey at \$20 seats three adults and has room for two small children up front. Hagestrom pointed out a mom, dad, and their little guy getting ready to go for a ride. "They're going to have such a good time, and they'll have spent an hour of quality time together."

The Carolina Beach store, located on the Boardwalk, also rents surfboards and kayaks. "Surfboard rentals have been really popular - I actually have a hard time keeping them in stock," Hagestrom said. "Kayaks are renting really well too."

Commenting that Carolina Beach is a "very up-and-coming community that is shifting toward being more of a family-friendly beach town," Hagestrom said he thinks Wheel Fun Rentals will help accelerate the evolution.

An investment of around \$200,000 covered the start-up costs for both locations, including an extensive inventory of new equipment. The franchise grants an exclusive territory New Hanover, Brunswick, and Pender counties, which allows for considerable expansion. "I'm already considering stores in Topsail and Oak Island," Hagestrom

said.

Plans are to stay open all year at both locations with some seasonal variation in hours.

Hagestrom and his wife Tracee run the business together, with a little help from 2-year-old Samuel. Formerly a corporate consultant for Titan Technology Partners in Charlotte, Hagestrom regularly commuted five hours for work and was often away from home from Sunday to Thursday night every week. Now he bikes from his home to the Boardwalk in five minutes. He happily traded suits and ties for Hawaiian print shirts and shorts.

When exploring territories for the Wheel Fun Rentals franchise, the Hagestroms considered Myrtle Beach, SC and Charleston, SC as well as Wilmington. Looking for a place where they could have a diversified portfolio of rental locations, the couple visited all three areas. "We wanted a place that had a combination of a nice historic downtown, a great beach community and a good park system," Hagestrom said. "We concluded that the business would work in each of the areas, but this is the place where we wanted to live and raise our children."

www.wheelfunrentals.com