Derek Strohl's favorite mode of transporation, even in snow, is his trusty bicycle. *Photo by Sam Arendt*

Whether it's snowing, icy, raining, cold or sunny, Port Washington resident Derek Strohl hops on his bicycle to catch the Ozaukee Express bus that takes him to his Bureau of Land Management job in downtown Milwaukee.

Strohl pops the bike on the bus's rack for the commute to Milwaukee. It's a half-block ride from the bus stop to his office, where he locks the bike in a rack outside the building.

Fellow commuters used to be surprised to see Strohl arrive on his bicycle in a snowstorm, but not anymore. Strohl rides an old mountain bike with nubby, studded tires in winter, carrying a change of clothes in a backpack.

What started as a mission to reduce his family's dependence on fossil fuels has turned into a routine that the cyclist loves.

"It's a great way to start the day. I actually love riding in snow that's three inches deep," Strohl said. "It's like going out to play in the snow.

"When I ride my bike, I don't depend on fossil fuels and I don't require tons of pavement. It also comes in handy to have my bike at work if I have errands to run in Milwaukee."

His mountain bike tires get good traction in snow, but don't help on ice, Strohl noted. The only

time he's fallen was on glare ice he didn't see until his bike skidded out from under him.

"I'm glad I had my helmet on," Strohl said.

On snowy days, he likes to ride the Ozaukee Interurban Trail, which is plowed in Port and goes through woodlands and ravines between his home on Melin Street to Port's park-and-ride lot on Highway LL.
It takes about 20 minutes to make the trek.

"I see more deer than people, and that's part of the reason I bike," Strohl said. "I get to see wildlife and smell the fresh air in a way I couldn't if I were driving.

"It's such a short bike ride that sometimes I barely break a sweat."

Depending on how much exercise he wants, Strohl may catch the bus at Wal-Mart in Saukville or the park-and-ride lot in Grafton.

On his way home, he sometimes gets off the bus in Mequon or Cedarburg for longer bike rides.

Strohl's unusual commute started two years ago when he sold his Ford Ranger truck, a vehicle he needed to carry gear for his previous job.

That left his family — wife Pam, who is a photographer, daughter Emma, 10, and son Sam, 7 — with only one vehicle, a 1992 four-wheel-drive Subaru wagon with 200,000 miles.

In an era when most families have at least two cars, Strohl was determined to make due with one.

When he was a student in Madison, he rode his bicycle everywhere until it was stolen. He couldn't afford another bike, so he patched together a bike from discarded pieces. He rode it to a bicycle shop, where the owner told him, "That's a great idea to
make your bike look like crap so nobody will steal it."

"I didn't know whether to be offended or proud," Strohl said. "I've had my share of cobbled-together bikes."

His landlord took pity and offered Strohl a bike a previous tenant had left, saying it was only a skeleton of a bike.

"It turned out that all it needed was air in the tires. It's a fantastic bike," said Strohl, who still rides the 18-speed cycle.

It's his crummy-weather bike.

In nice weather, Strohl hops on a Diamond Back 14-speed bike he bought for $400 in 1992.

“I don’t want a bike I need to insure. I don’t need a fancy bike for the type of riding I do,” Strohl said.

“It depends on the weather which bike I take or which bike has air in the tires. I do all the maintenance myself, so there is always something that has to be tweaked.”

His wife competed in a triathlon with his road bike last summer. On Christmas Eve, an anonymous friend left a used, but newer bike festooned with a red ribbon on their porch.

“So she has her own racing bike, and it’s better than mine,” Strohl said.

His daughter rides a bike and his son rides in a trailer attached to his bike.

The Strohl family adheres to the motto “Reduce, reuse, recycle,” using few disposable products and making a conscious effort to consume less.

They have a garden, where they grow much of their food, and eat locally grown, organic food as much as possible.

“Mostly, we use less,” Strohl said. “Our culture seems to be bent on finding high-tech ways of saving energy. We need to do less consumption, watch less TV, get outside more.”

Strohl wants to start a community garden in Westport Meadows Park near Dunwiddie Elementary School on land that used to be a soccer field.

He is organizing a committee for the garden and seeking permission from the city to use the land for that purpose.

“I’m hearing a lot of interest from the community and getting support from the city,” Strohl said.

“A community garden is not just about growing food. It’s meeting neighbors, talking to them. It’s looking them in the eye and sharing space. We all have our own houses, our own lawn mowers, our own space. We don’t borrow from one another, and that’s detrimental.

“I’ve discovered if I want to live in a sustainable way, I can’t do it as an individual. I have to depend on farmers to grow the food and on people to buy it for a price that they can make a living.”

Strohl’s job is in keeping with his love of the outdoors and desire to protect the environment and natural resources.

While most of his Bureau of Land Management colleagues deal with managing the mining of minerals, oil and natural gas on federal land, Strohl manages more than 500 islands in Wisconsin lakes and rivers, including 11 islands on the Milwaukee River.

“When Wisconsin was originally surveyed, the islands were omitted, so they remain federal land,” Strohl said.

“It’s my job to see what’s there and what we should do with them. I’m the only one who spends a significant amount of time on these islands. I get to do a lot of canoeing, cut a lot of brush. I can even get to the islands in winter if there is enough ice.”