

Campaign focuses on pedestrian safety along Bloomfield Avenue

Mollie Shauger, NorthJersey 6:53 p.m. ET May 10, 2017



(Photo: Mollie Shauger/NorthJersey.com)

In a coordinated effort to reduce accidents and deaths on a major artery in Essex County, the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority has partnered with six towns and the county to educate drivers and pedestrians about traffic safety.

Officials from the NJTPA and towns along Bloomfield Avenue, including Bloomfield, Glen Ridge, Montclair and Verona, gathered at Bloomfield Town Hall on Tuesday, May 9, to announce the official start of the Street Smart NJ campaign, though it's already begun in many municipalities.

In Essex County, the NJTPA will work with the towns, their police departments and the Essex County Sheriff's Department to implement the campaign through a period of several weeks, through posting signs along

Bloomfield Avenue and increasing enforcement of traffic laws.

The study is the first for a corridor in the state, officials noted.

The campaign's slogan is "Check Your Vital Signs," because "pedestrian safety is vital to the well-being and lives are truly on the line," said NJTPA Executive Director Mary K. Murphy.

In their travels, motorists, cyclists and pedestrians may have already noticed signs like "Stop for Pedestrians," "Wait for the Walk," and "Heads up, Phones Down." Towns are urged to use street signs, posters, safety tip cards and other educational materials as part of the campaign.

"Street Smart is a proven success," said Murphy, adding that evaluations following recent campaigns have shown a 40 percent reduction in drivers failing to yield to pedestrians and cyclists and a 28 percent decline in jaywalking incidents.

She said New Jersey has a much higher average pedestrian fatality rate compared to national statistics.

According to the New Jersey Division of Highway Traffic Safety, 765 pedestrians were killed statewide between 2011 and 2015, and more than 22,000 pedestrians were injured during those years.

Pedestrians also accounted for nearly 29 percent of people killed in vehicle crashes during those years, nearly double the national rate for pedestrian fatalities.

Essex County Executive Joe DiVincenzo, the third vice chair of the NJTPA Board of Trustees, said he was particularly alarmed that from 2011 to 2015, there were 256 crashes involving pedestrians along Bloomfield Avenue, resulting in three deaths.

He called the campaign "long overdue" and affirmed that safety was the top priority for the county.

Verona Mayor Kevin Ryan said 14 pedestrian crashes had occurred during the same years on Bloomfield Avenue in Verona, with one fatality in which the community lost a well-known business owner in town.

He said Verona has already started to increase its enforcement, but the mayor also called on residents to be responsible for obeying traffic laws.

"We really all have to examine our own driving habits," said Ryan.

In Bloomfield, police will hand out pedestrian safety tip cards to motorists, along with conducting daily enforcement of jaywalking, vehicles not stopping for pedestrians, and inattentive driving and walking.

"The message of the Bloomfield Police Department is simple: paying attention to safety should be a routine part of getting around both for pedestrians each and every day and for motorists each and every day," said Bloomfield Police Director Samuel DeMaio.

Glen Ridge will distribute items to pedestrians, including commuters and children who walk to school, with Police Chief Sheila Byron-Lagattuta noting that walkers need as much education as drivers.



Signs like this one on Franklin Street in Bloomfield advise pedestrians to wait for the signal to cross the street. (Photo: Mollie Shauger/NorthJersey.com)

A problematic intersection for them is Bloomfield and Hillside avenues, she said, with pedestrian-related accidents mostly occurring when an out-of-town driver who is unfamiliar with the local traffic laws hits a pedestrian.

The police chief said grant money has been earmarked for pedestrian safety in town, and the borough hopes to install solar-powered pedestrian buttons at crosswalks before the school year ends.

Lt. Stephanie Egnezzo, from the Montclair Police Department's Traffic Bureau, said the MPD, which just ended a distracted driving campaign, will also hand out safety cards and display posters, and will speak about teen driving safety at Montclair High School next week. Police also intend to do pedestrian decoys at crosswalks in town, in addition to individual patrols.

The MPD's aim is "just getting the word out there and making sure people are following the law," said Egnezzo.

Lisa Lee, the bike and pedestrian program manager for EZ Ride/Meadowlink and a Safe Routes to School coordinator, in stressing the educational and health component of the campaign, said a "walk to school" event is planned in Bloomfield later this month along with a "walk-ability" audit this autumn.

Lee said a bike-and-pedestrian team with EZ Ride studied traffic behaviors at Grove Street and Bloomfield Avenue in Montclair, an intersection that is near a train station and a school, from 2 to 4 p.m. last Thursday. Among the findings, she said, were 51 cars speeding, 91 cars not yielding to pedestrians, and 167 distracted drivers doing things such as texting, listening to music, or eating. Worst of all, she said, 14 cars ran red lights.

She said the team will go back to the same intersection in about six to eight weeks, following local education and enforcement actions, to observe any changes.

Cyndi Steiner, executive director of the New Jersey Bike and Walk Coalition, said the coalition supports the Street Smart campaign, but encourages the county to do more than what she called "a marketing campaign."

"We hope the county uses this as a kickoff to more substantial engineering improvements to Bloomfield Avenue," said Steiner, citing measures such as lane-narrowing, bump-outs and additional crosswalks.

Even things like bike lanes reduce speeding, she said.

She encouraged the NJTPA to do a more regional study of the entire stretch of Bloomfield Avenue, calling the highway one of the most dangerous in the county for several years.

"Something real needs to be done," Steiner said.

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