

MONTCLAIR'S SAFE STREETS IMPLEMENTATION PLAN STALLED FOR OVER A YEAR

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Last year, residents came out to a series of workshops on a Safe Complete Streets Implementation Plan drafted by a steering committee. FILE PHOTO

By Jaimie Julia Winters

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At a recent planning board meeting, Cyndi Steiner of the New Jersey Bike/Walk Coalition blamed the town for its failure to implement safer streets and create easy alternatives to cars in Montclair.

Although Montclair has had a Complete Streets Policy since 2009, and the 2015 Land Use and Circulation Element of the Montclair Master Plan recommends the town “establish a network for pedestrian and cyclists,” the plan to implement improvements remains stalled.

The 2009 policy requires that future roadway improvement projects include safe accommodations for bicyclists, pedestrians, transit riders and the mobility-impaired.

The master plan reads, in part:

“Many residents have expressed that Montclair lacks safe and easy alternatives to automobile connections to amenities (schools, open spaces, train stations, town centers, etc.). Of particular importance in this regard are the current design, configuration, and maintenance of streets and sidewalks, which gives priority to the needs of private cars and does not adequately balance the needs of pedestrians and cyclists. There should be a complete network of safe and attractive streetscapes, sidewalks, crosswalks, bikeways,

and passageways. This should include improved lighting of sidewalks and crosswalks. Smooth sidewalks free of tripping hazards are important to ensure safety and security for pedestrians. For bicycles, this includes routes that encourage users of all experience levels to ride. Ample, secure bicycle parking should be available and easy to find.”

The township received a grant in 2016 to hire consultant NV5 and create a steering committee to come up with a plan to implement safe streets throughout Montclair. Through community meetings, outreach and a survey [the implementation plan](#) was created. The town was not able to provide the grant amount.



Tour de Montclair bicycle ride event brings in hundreds during the month of October.

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Last February, planner Janice Talley presented the implementation plan to the town council and planning board hoping to have it implemented into the master plan.

That plan includes a menu of infrastructure upgrade options, depending on the type of street and the volume of traffic. Some of the infrastructure options include bike lanes or “sharrows” (share the ride areas); pedestrian islands in the middle of crosswalks; and improved countdown signals at crosswalks. Other suggestions were transit upgrades and shuttle services.

However, planning board members focused mainly on the bike paths, their placement on streets they deemed unsafe, particularly Grove Street, and liability issues.

A public survey conducted by a SAFE Streets steering committee, which included members of Bike Walk Montclair, Senior Advisory, Pedestrian Safety, town planner, engineer and police departments, identified 12 areas in need of mobility improvements:

- South Segment: Claremont Avenue, Valley Road, Walnut Street/Park Drive, Forest Street, Label Street, Depot Square; Elm Street; and Park Street, The Crescent, South Fullerton Avenue, Union Street.
- Central Montclair: Grove Street, North Mountain Avenue, Park Street and Watchung Avenue.
- North Segment: Grove Street, Upper Mountain Avenue, Valley Road, Park Street and Bellevue Avenue.

The plan identifies potential areas for walking and biking paths to connect areas of interest (schools, park, museums and shopping) around town, as well as traffic-calming measures such as wider sidewalks, narrower streets, highly-visual crosswalks, center medians and better lighting, Bike Walk Montclair President Debra Kagan said in interview last week.

“Streets are for everyone, not just cars,” Kagan said. “The bicyclists are already there. How can we enhance safety for all users? In Montclair, it’s difficult for residents not to rely on private vehicles because it lacks these

connections. If we create a better network, there will be less cars on the roads.”

At the meeting held over a year ago, Talley explained the implementation plan was “flexible” and would be used as guidance only for planners, and in the case of when streets were being repaved. If a bike route were to be explored, the plan gives various recommendations on how to implement it for particular streets. Potential bike-route streets were suggested based on street width, traffic volume, current bike usage and surrounding land use, said Talley.

“In 2010, there was this idea that we were going to turn into the next Portland. It’s not 56 degrees all year long here,” said Board member Martin Schwartz.

Concerns were also raised over the potential to lose parking spaces if bike routes were were created.

“Restructuring to one side [as the plan suggests on some streets], that would cripple the town,” Council liaison Robin Schlager said.

Board member Carmel Loughman suggested the plan clearly delineate pedestrian versus bicyclist enhancements. "They are vastly different approaches," she said.

Bike paths have a calming effect on traffic, Kagan told Montclair Local.

In Montclair, from 2006-2015, there were 479 pedestrian injuries, with nine being fatalities and 22 incapacitating. During the same time, for cyclists there were 149 injuries, two incapacitating injuries and no fatalities, according to the report.

Kagan pointed to the 42 crashes in Montclair last year, stating accidents are not on the decline and lowering the speed limit alone, such as was done last year on Grove Street, does not make streets safer for cyclists and pedestrians.

Councilwoman Renee Baskerville, who served on the committee, suggested that the loss of the town's full-time engineer could be a reason the plan lost steam. She also said placement of bus stops is also a safety concern.

John Wynn, the planning board chair, said the plan needed more work.

"You have guidelines on how the streets should be used, he said. "But how does the plan work on a practical level, how does it get implemented?"

The group was not given a written memo or suggestions for improving the plan, said Kagan.

“We need specifics from the planning board on the direction we should take,” added Kagan.

The other problem is that the steering committee is no longer functioning and the grant funds were spent, she said.

A request for the grant amount was not answered by the town.

Some changes could be made by a revived committee.

“But if we need to employ the consultant again that will cost money,” Kagan said.

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