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Dangerous roads in Clifton, Paterson will be made narrower

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(Photo: Photo by Matt Fagan)

Regional safety officials and Passaic County are teaming up to provide a big fat check to put several of the county's most dangerous roads on a diet.

That's a road diet — a strategy to improve pedestrian and motorist safety by reducing the number of lanes.

The \$6.2 million project will be funded by a federal grant administered by the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority. It targets intersections along Allwood Road and Clifton Avenue in Clifton and Market Street in Paterson.

Two intersections along Allwood Road are ranked first and sixth on the planning authority's list of high-crash intersections in the county, said David Behrend, director of communications and government affairs at the organization.

In Paterson, Market Street is the county's No. 2 corridor for crashes, but the segment the project is addressing is actually the sixth-worst intersection for crashes involving pedestrians, Behrend said.

Passaic County Freeholder John Bartlett, who is an NJTPA trustee, welcomed the decision.

"Allwood Road in Clifton and Paterson's Market Street are at the top of the NJTPA's list of high-crash pedestrian corridors in the county, so it is critical that we make these upgrades," Bartlett said.

The planning authority announced project funding at its Jan. 22 meeting.

The New Jersey State Police puts the number of pedestrian deaths in 2017 at 184, exceeding 2016's toll by 18 and making it one of the worst years on record. It's the highest number since 1993, when 197 were killed, state records show.

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The answer may well be to curb New Jersey motorists' appetite for ever-wider roadways, said Cyndi Steiner, executive director New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition.

Road diets are effective in "calming traffic" and making the road safer for pedestrians and bike riders, she said.

New Jersey, she added, continues to rank among the worst states for pedestrian fatalities. More than 30% of the state's road fatalities in 2017 were pedestrians. Nationally the average ranged between 16 and 17%.

"When travel lanes are narrowed, drivers inherently slow down, which reduces the chances of hitting a pedestrian and also reduces the severity of impact when a crash occurs," Steiner said. "While most New Jerseyans may want quicker travel times, we cannot do that at the expense of peoples' lives."

Instead of widening roads, she said, the focus should be on increasing transportation options, such as mass transit, biking and walking.

"Putting our resources solely into road widening does nothing to ease congestion and sets us up for continued high road crash and fatality numbers," Steiner said.

Fewer lanes, better signs

For Clifton, the plan is to reduce the number of travel lanes on Allwood Road from Hepburn Road to Passaic Avenue, and on Clifton Avenue from Allwood Road to Van Houten Avenue, Passaic officials said.

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For instance, the multi-lane roundabout at Allwood Road and Bloomfield Avenue will be reconfigured into a one-lane roundabout, officials said

This project would also upgrade traffic signals and add curbs extensions, which increase visibility and reduce the crossing distance for pedestrians. The cost for this project is \$2.66 million.

For the \$3.56 million Market Street project, pedestrian countdown signals will be added, along with high-visibility crosswalks and upgraded traffic signals along a 1.35-mile stretch from Spruce Street to Madison Avenue in Paterson.

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Curb extensions will be incorporated at intersections where feasible to reduce the crossing distance for pedestrians and improve visibility, particularly around the NJ Transit rail station, NJPTA officials said.

Passaic County officials said the overall project will begin with engineering studies. They had no timetable for completion.

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