

**ESSEX COUNTY**

# Texting while walking could soon hurt your wallet in this N.J. town

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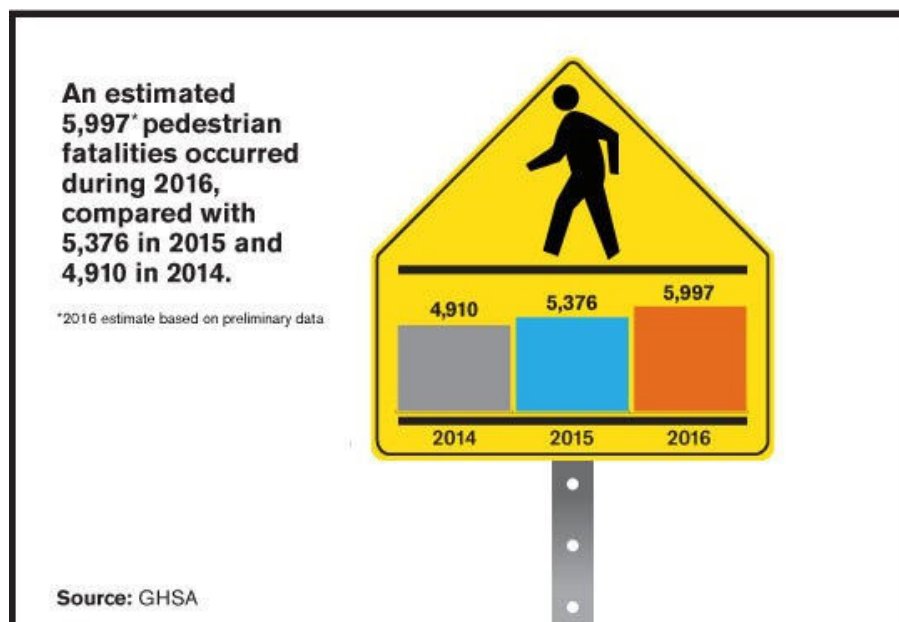
First came the leaf blower ban. Is a prohibition on texting in the roadway next on the list of uncommon ordinances to come to one Essex County township?

It might be, according to a Maplewood committeewoman who raised the possibility of ticketing pedestrians who step into the street while looking at their phones.

"There are already laws on the books for driving while being distracted by a mobile device, and it's becoming more and more apparent with younger people like Generation Z ... that they need to look up and make sure that they can cross safely," Committeewoman Nancy Adams said in a phone interview.

Inspired by Honolulu's new law banning "distracted walking" in the roadway, Adams said she proposed the idea of ticketing pedestrians who look at their phones at the Jan. 16 committee meeting. The township's public safety committee, which includes first responders, is now slated to weigh in on the suggestion.

The proposal is in its very beginning stages, Adams said, so no details have been hashed out. Fines would likely be minimal, and police officers would use discretion in deciding when to hand out a ticket. A person using his phone as a flashlight to cross the street, for example, would not be fined under Adams' plan.



## Nationwide data, courtesy of Governors Highway Safety Association



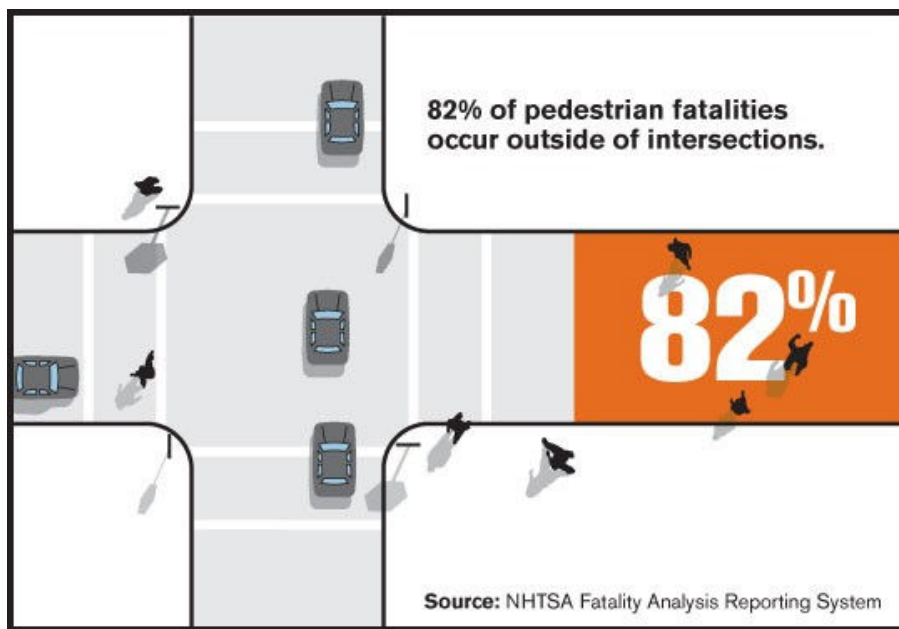
Ticketing pedestrians would be the latest in what Adams said is a string of recent safety initiatives in Maplewood, including educational programs and cops in plain clothes giving summonses to drivers who fail to stop at crosswalks.

The township also plans to purchase reflective armbands to give to people who frequently walk downtown in the evenings, Interim Police Chief Jimmy DeVaul said. He said ticketing pedestrians who look at their phones in the road would be more of a safety and awareness initiative than a punitive one.

Creating an ordinance to govern pedestrians' behavior would also shift some of the responsibility for their safety to them because "the driver's not always the one at fault" in an accident, Adams said.

Although she said pedestrian accidents don't occur more frequently in Maplewood than in any other town, the Governors Highway Safety Association estimates there were roughly 6,000 pedestrian fatalities nationwide in 2016, up 11 percent from the prior year. State Police data shows 602 of those pedestrians who died in collisions with motor vehicles were in New Jersey.

Many factors likely contributed to the uptick in deaths, but the growing use of smart phones may have had an impact, the safety association said in a report.



Nationwide data, courtesy of Governors Highway Safety Association

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Maplewood would likely be the only municipality in the state to ban pedestrians from texting or using a smart phone app in the roadway. Township officials and the New Jersey League of Municipalities were unaware of any other towns with similar policies.

A statewide proposal introduced to the Legislature in 2016 never reached a committee and was not subject to a vote. The bill, proposed by Assemblywoman Pamela Lampitt, D-Camden, would have fined pedestrians \$50 for texting or otherwise using a phone while crossing the street.

Cyndi Steiner, the executive director of the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition, said she felt any attempts to regulate pedestrians' behavior in the roadway would be akin to victim blaming. She said the state and municipalities should focus on narrowing road lanes, creating bumpouts and adding lights to crosswalks to encourage drivers to slow down.

"We have a big problem, and it's caused by speed," Steiner said. "It's not irrational pedestrian behavior. They're trying to survive in an environment that's not built for them."

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