

AUGUST 18, 2014

Keeping cyclists safe from cars on perilous Route 9W proving a challenge

By Deena Yellin and Abbot Koloff

The problem: ensuring the safety of thousands of bicyclists cruising scenic — and dangerous — Route 9W along the Hudson River on weekends. The only likely lasting solution: a bike path that winds off the highway for at least part of the way.

That seems to be the consensus reached by state legislators and planners, local officials, police and bicycling groups after what all think are insufficient initial safety improvements by the state this year on a stretch of roadway that's become one of the most popular cycling spots in the nation.

After years of bicycle-vehicle collisions along the tortuous, narrow nine-mile highway, the state this year restriped the roadway in sections and erected fluorescent signs urging motorists and bicyclists to “Share the Road.”

But state transportation staff and local officials are exploring lasting, major solutions — including a bike path that would divert cyclists from the highway. But whether that option is viable, for both economic and engineering reasons, remains in question.

“We need to work with all the stakeholders to see if a bike path is feasible,” said Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttle, D-Englewood, who held a bicycle meeting in April for municipal officials along Route 9W.

While officials laud the signs and restriping as a positive step, the meeting with Huttle included talks on the need for a path that would be separate from the highway, at least in some areas. Huttle said officials are trying to determine “two critical components: the location of such a path and the ability use both public and private monies to fund construction of the path.”

She said she has approached the Port Authority about funding for such a path, and also is exploring possible use of state and county money reserved for preserving open space. Those talks, she said, are in preliminary stages.

An even bigger problem may be trying to fit a path wide enough for two-way biking down a narrow strip along the roadway in Fort Lee and Englewood Cliffs, which bicyclists consider the most treacherous stretch. In some places there may be less than two feet in width, not enough for a bike path.

“It’s going to be a bit of an engineering challenge,” said Fort Lee Mayor Mark Sokolich.



Thousands of bicyclists and cars use route 9w in Alpine every weekend.

Jennifer Brown/Special to the Record

Some of the land along the highway is part of the Palisades Interstate Park, officials said. But the park commission has not yet been approached about possible use of that land, Huttle said. Park officials could not be reached for comment Monday.

Sokolich said Fort Lee might consider providing some funding toward a bike path, but added that he would expect officials to approach the Palisades Interstate Park Commission about the idea before paying for an engineering study. “You need to have a conversation with them,” he said of the PIP, adding that the commission has been “nothing but cooperative with Fort Lee.”

Englewood Cliffs Mayor Joseph Parisi said that in addition to the park commission providing land, utility poles might have to be moved to provide at least four feet of space for bicyclists. And he said some trees might have to be removed, creating potential environmental concerns.

“I don’t think there’s a quick fix,” Parisi said.

Department of Transportation spokesman Steve Schapiro didn’t rule out the possibility of a path, but noted difficulties.

“It’s a challenging piece of road,” he said. “The road changes during the stretch — in some areas it’s two lanes and other parts four. We’d have to look at right of way, utility relocation, if there’s room to add a bike lane, how it would affect all modes of transportation, and cost.”

He said “long-term alternatives” are being considered as part of a “concept development phase of the project, which should be complete this summer. We’re looking at a lot of things, like roadway engineering, traffic impact, the cost of any project and, of course, safety.”



New signs have a warning for motorists and cyclists.

The department restriped some highway sections to allow for simultaneous motor vehicle and bike traffic, and in May it installed 72 share-the-road signs on sections of both the northbound and southbound lanes where there are no shoulders.

Bicyclists have long been drawn to Route 9W’s winding roadway along the Hudson. The DOT estimated in 2011 that 6,000 cyclists rode it on weekends. That popularity has led to deaths and injuries, with at least 11 reported accidents since the start of 2013. In November 2008, a cyclist died when struck from behind by a motor vehicle, and another was fatally injured in June 2012.

Nelson Gutierrez, who owns Strictly Bicycles, a Fort Lee shop where cyclists often meet to ride on 9W, said the shoulders in Tenafly and Alpine are wide enough for bike lanes, but that cars sometimes drift into them.

“If the shoulders were marked as bike lanes, that would be great,” he said.

He and others said the areas in Fort Lee and Englewood Cliffs are the most dangerous, with cyclists sometimes forced to use the center of the road to avoid potholes on a stretch in Englewood Cliffs.

Englewood Cliffs Police Chief Michael Cioffi said the area is “not suited for riding a bike. It’s a heavily trafficked roadway. I’m concerned for their safety.”

From 2009 to 2011, there were 14 bicycle accidents on Route 9W, according to the DOT, and the number of crashes involving bicycles and cars has been rising. Most recently, on Aug. 6, a hit-and-run vehicle crashed into a bicycle, causing a chain reaction that sent two bicyclists to a hospital. Englewood Cliffs had four crashes over the past two years, including one last year in which a victim was treated at a hospital. Tenafly had two, and Alpine had five. Alpine also has had 17 calls for aid for injured cyclists since the start of 2013.

Some bicyclists greeted the initial measures happily, while advocating for more.

Cyndi Steiner, executive director of New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition, said she appreciates shoulders being widened in the northern section of 9W. But she added that cars park on the shoulder in certain sections, forcing cyclists onto the road. She said she would like to see parking banned in those areas and a dedicated bike lane in the southern portion of the highway, which she said is “extremely dangerous.”

Jennifer Benepe, a writer for Cyclists International, cited a downhill portion on Hudson Terrace in Englewood Cliffs that is “riddled with potholes and attempted patches” as being “extremely hazardous.” She added: “Neither cyclists nor motorists will be prepared for this when they come into conflict there, especially at speed because it is a downhill.”

<http://www.northjersey.com/news/keeping-cyclists-safe-from-cars-on-perilous-route-9w-proving-a-challenge-1.1069364?page=all>