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Alternate Route: One man's bike crash is a window in to a disturbing state statistic

Lanes benefit drivers, cyclists and pedestrians

By Larry Higgs

On April 19, I became a statistic.

My bicycle was sideswiped by a car that cut me off to make a right turn. I tried to steer my bike with the car to avoid the collision, but was sideswiped by the tail end of the car. The last thing I remembered before hitting the ground was that the car's right directional wasn't on. That landed me in the emergency room for five stitches to close up a deep laceration to my left elbow.

My accident happened three days after the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition released a report about how bicycling and walking activities and accidents compare to the rest of the country. New Jersey is the second worst in fatalities with pedestrians and cyclists making up 27.2 percent of all road fatalities, compared to 14.9 percent for the nation.

This might imply that walking and cycling is too dangerous for Jersey and we'd be better off sticking to our cars, the bus or the train, but that's not necessarily the case, according to the full report by the Alliance for Biking & Walking.

It's like the chicken or the egg scenario. The more people who walk and cycle means that more of them are visible to drivers. Drivers are "more likely to operate carefully and safely around walkers and bikers when they're used to seeing people biking and walking," the national report said.



The first bicyclists over the refurbished Oceanic Bridge rides toward Middletown after a May 2012 ceremony opening the bridge. Can cars and an increasing number of bicycles safely share the road?

Unfortunately, the driver that hit me obviously was neither "operating carefully" nor used to dealing with bicycles. Some of the emergency room staff said they couldn't understand why the driver didn't see me, since I was wearing what I call my neon green "don't run me over" jersey. While my accident happened in Jersey City, the kind of road it occurred on is like many suburban "arterial" roads: four lanes, with on-street parking and enough real estate for cars and bikes. I've often suggested this road would be a natural for bike lanes because it's so wide, no one would lose any space.

How bike and pedestrian infrastructure grows often comes down to financing and political will. The national report said they're "seeing a growing number of concerned citizens organizing for safer, more accessible streets for walking and bicycling."

Movements to do that start on the grassroots level as they did in Red Bank, when concerned community members started Red Bank Safe Routes. Suggestions came out of a brainstorming session at the Red Bank Middle School. Borough Engineer Christine Ballard successfully applied for a state grant, which led to the bike and pedestrian study that was adopted as part of the borough's master plan. Monmouth County followed suit with a study in 2011 and Ocean County finished its study that year.

The first project resulted in marking Chestnut Street with "sharrows," the painted symbol indicating that it is a bike route. Sometimes change is as simple as a bucket of paint and a stencil. One of the places change was discussed was at the Bike & Walk Coalition summit held at the Bloustein School of Public Policy and Planning. The workshops and brainstorming sessions included obtaining funding for bike and pedestrian projects, driver and cyclist education, and safely sharing the roads.

Would a bike lane have saved me from being hit? I've always believed that bike lanes benefit cyclists and drivers by telling both where the bikes belong. Of course it helps if everyone pays attention. Cyclists are all over. I saw people riding bikes on Route 35 in Holmdel and Middletown during some of the coldest days of the winter. The bottom line is cyclists and pedestrians are out there, and there will be more of them.

New Jersey is one of only 11 states with a goal of increasing biking and walking. It's one of 27 states to have a state-level Complete Streets policy, which says when a road is rebuilt that should be designed to have facilities for everyone who uses the road. It's also one of only 20 states to have a bicycle and pedestrian master plan.

Other proposals to make it safer on two wheels and two legs are coming out of the Legislature. One is modeled after the state's "Move Over Law," which requires drivers to change lanes when encountering a first responder, tow truck or road crew on the shoulder of the road. One bill (A1577) would require drivers to provide three feet of clearance between their vehicle and a bike or pedestrian. The similar version would require the vehicle to "move over" to provide a safe passing distance between them.

We're here, we're walking and cycling. It's not a contest of "my mode of transportation is better than yours." Let's just get along - safely.

<http://www.app.com/article/20140428/NJCOLUMNIST38/304280050/One-man-s-bike-crash-is-a-window-in-to-a-disturbing-state-statistic>