

NJ bicyclists face roads fraught with mortal threats

EVEN AFTER 58 DEATHS IN
FOUR YEARS, SAFETY
MEASURES FACE ROADBLOCKS.

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Jerome Koch loved to keep Fair Haven clean.

The vocal environmentalist and [Fair Haven](#) councilman biked around the two-river northern Monmouth County borough, collecting roadside trash and recyclables with a grabber.

But his devotion took a tragic turn on Nov. 29.

Carrying a garbage bag in one hand, the 63-year-old Koch lost control of the bicycle and turned in front of a 1999 BMW sedan as the driver tried vainly to avoid the collision, according to an investigative report based on the account of the driver. He died a day later.

High-risk state

New Jersey is a dangerous place for pedestrians and bicyclists.



Fair Haven Councilman Jerome A. Koch died after a bicycling accident. (From left) Committee members Eric Jaeger, Brian Rice, Jerome Koch and Joe Mulé, Mayor Benjamin Lucarelli, committee chairman Jon Peters, Freeholder Thomas Arnone and former Mayor Michael Halfacre.

(Photo: Susanne Cervenka/Staff Photo)

Among the 50 states, New Jersey had the second-highest percentage of fatal motor vehicle accidents, 28.9 percent, that claimed the lives of pedestrians or bicyclists in 2012, the most recently available state-by-state federal figures for both.

That percentage rose to 32.4 percent in 2014, according to the state police.

[Deadly crossings: Why walking is dangerous at the Shore](#)

New Jersey is one of 17 states in the nation and the only one among Northeast and Middle Atlantic states that doesn't offer any roadside protection for bikers, according to the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#).

From Maine to Virginia and throughout most of the country, motorists are required to allow bicyclists a "safe distance" while passing — usually defined as a 3- or 4-foot berth.

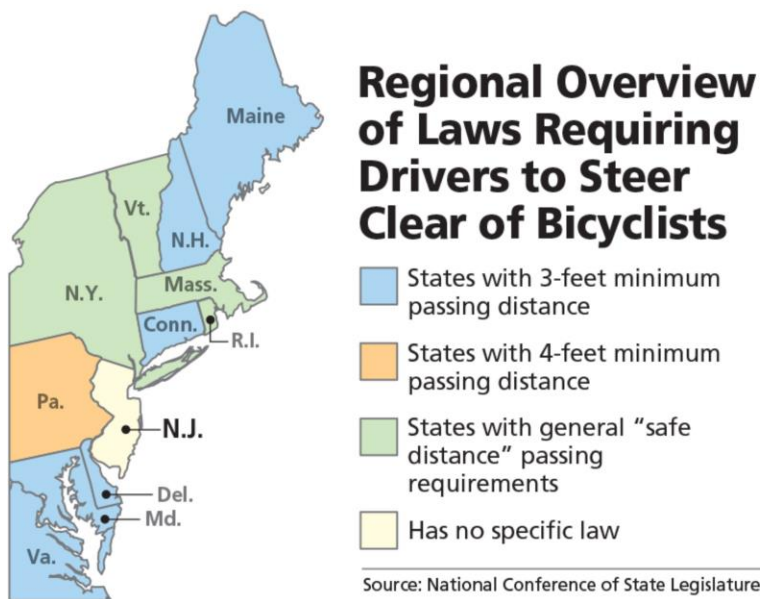
With so many narrow roads through Monmouth and Ocean counties, though, that's a hard feat for many drivers, which leaves bikers at a higher risk for injury and death.

Safety advocates say that is all the more reason why motorists should exercise more caution and patience.

Joint bills pending in the New Jersey Legislature that would make it a violation, with a fine of up to \$500, for not giving 4 feet of space to bicyclists, people in wheelchairs, road workers and other legal pedestrians has been stalled in committee, opposed over concerns about how the law would work in densely packed urban areas.

There's another troubling statistic for New Jersey that touches on a broad debate over bicycle safety.

Of the 58 people who died in bicycle accidents from 2010 through 2013, just four were wearing helmets, or 7 percent.



Overview of law requiring drivers to steer clear of bicyclists

(Photo: Staff graphic by Jeff Colson)

Additionally, safety equipment on the whole was scant in those fatal New Jersey accidents.

Only one of the riders was wearing reflective equipment or clothing. And none had lighting. Twenty-three of those fatal bicycle accidents occurred in the dark, in areas with lighting and areas without, or at dawn or dusk.

But only five of the helmet-less riders who died were required to wear helmets. Under New Jersey law, only bicyclists under the age of 17 must wear bicycle helmets.

Police and medics who arrived at the scene of the Koch accident said the councilman suffered a head injury.

Officials would not say whether Koch was wearing a helmet, but a property report connected to the investigation does not list a helmet among the articles of personal property found at the scene. Those articles included a bike light, a reflector and a head band.



Dale Houck is shown with his bike Tuesday, May 5, 2015, as he prepares to commute from his job in Eatontown to home in Red Bank.

(Photo: THOMAS P. COSTELLO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

The 44-year-old driver was not charged after police took her blood to check for alcohol or drugs; examined her cell phone records to see if she had been texting or using her phone at the time of the accident; and inspected the car for any mechanical problems.

Mayor Ben Lucarelli, himself a bicyclist and ardent biking advocate who is pushing for more bike-friendly road designs for Fair Haven and Monmouth County, praised Koch as a dedicated public servant, underscoring the loss from one fatal bike accident.

"He would preach to us about putting cigarette butts out and litter. He was passionate about leaving the community better than when he found it. He believed everyone had a right and a duty to keep the community clean," Lucarelli said.

No universal law

Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia have a bicycle helmet law for children, generally younger than 16 or 17. Twenty-nine states have no bicycle helmet law at all.

In the whole of the United States, only the Virgin Islands requires all bike riders to wear helmets. Some cities, towns and counties in the continental U.S. do also.

“Mandatory helmet laws have a counter effect in that they actually decrease ridership.”

CYNDI STEINER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE NEW JERSEY BIKE & WALK COALITION

[New Jersey's 5 most common deadly bicycle accidents](#)

The position of advocates on the issue is complex.

Cyndi Steiner, executive director of the [New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition](#), an advocacy group, said her group encourages the use of helmets, but is strictly opposed to a universal helmet law.

"Mandatory helmet laws have a counter effect in that they actually decrease ridership as they're perceived as a barrier to riding and work against cyclist safety. The more riders on

the road, the safer it is for everybody, therefore we want to eliminate or minimize barriers to riding," she said.

Safe or not?

Common sense may seem to dictate that helmets protect bike riders, as some research confirms. A [2013 Australian study](#) involving more than 6,000 bicycle accidents showed that "helmet use was associated with reduced risk of head injury in bicycle collisions with motor vehicles of up to 74 percent," although un-helmeted riders displayed riskier behavior.



Dale Houck is shown with his bike Tuesday, May 5, 2015, as he prepares to commute from his job in Eatontown to home in Red Bank.

(Photo: THOMAS P. COSTELLO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

But critics of bike helmets point to research that shows that in countries where bike helmets became compulsory, there was no reduction in injuries. A [British psychological study](#) even showed that car drivers are more careless when around helmeted riders, on the whole traveling 3 inches closer to them.

Some [bicycle advocates in Europe](#) take a more militant stance, suggesting, for instance, that pedestrians would be better off wearing helmets.

While there's no immediate prospect of expanding the helmet law and may never be, two joint bills requiring that motorists give a 4-foot berth to bike riders, people in wheelchairs, road workers and other legal pedestrians has been approved by the state Assembly.

But, according to bike safety advocates, one man stands in the way of its passage.

Legislative roadblock

After the state Assembly adopted the 4-foot passing legislation [A1577/1600](#) last June, the measures were referred to the Senate Transportation Committee, where they have failed to advance.



Dale Houck moves with the traffic on Hope Road at Route 36 in Tinton Falls, Tuesday, May 5, 2015, as he commutes from his job in Eatontown to home in Red Bank.

(Photo: THOMAS P. COSTELLO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

The chairman of that committee, Sen. Nicholas J. Sacco, D-Bergen, "refuses to post the bill," effectively killing it, said Janna Chernetz, senior New Jersey policy analyst for the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, a non-profit advocacy group that aims to reduce car dependency in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

Sacco's spokesman, Philip Swibinski, said the senator opposes the bill because "it's just not workable in urban places."

Asked how New Jersey differs from other Northeast states that have already adopted similar laws, Swibinski said that Hudson County has towns that are among the most densely populated in the country.

"We have very narrow streets," Swibinski said. "If you try to move over 4 feet, you'll be in the other lane, into oncoming traffic."

Sacco supports bike lanes in North Bergen, where he serves as mayor, where appropriate, Swibinski said. And the 4-foot passing law may work in other parts of New Jersey.

"It's not a one-size-fits-all approach," Swibinski said. "He wants to leave it up to local communities."

Swibinski added that Sacco believes laws such as careless and reckless driving already cover the issue.

Infrastructure improvements

Notwithstanding the legislative imperatives, safety advocates say that most problems with bike and pedestrian safety lie in the design of roads.

"For decades, roads have been designed with one user in mind and that is the motorist," Chernetz said.

She said 113 municipalities, seven counties and the state have adopted [Complete Streets](#) policies, which favor road design that figure in bicyclists, people in wheelchairs, pedestrians and others.

New York City, among others, has been a recent convert, redesigning long stretches of major streets to accommodate bicyclists and vehicular traffic, and at once add more protections for pedestrians.

"That's returning to the concept that roads should be designed for all users, of all ages, of all abilities," Chernetz said.