

## **Does Montclair's bike and walk friendliness end at Bloomfield Avenue?** **By Andrew Segedin**

In recent months, Montclair has been honored for its biking and walkability. The town's been recognized as a bronze-level bike-conducive community by Bicycle Friendly America. Montclair's been deemed a silver-level walkable community by the national Pedestrian and Bicycle Friendly Information Center. A gold-level Safe Routes to School Plan has been ordained on the municipality.

Even Montclair's busiest corridor on Bloomfield Avenue is, for the most part, deemed a "walker's paradise" by Walkscore.com.

But that doesn't tell the whole story, according to Montclair Center BID Executive Director Luther Flurry.

"We're off the charts in the walkability index, because everything you could want is within 100 feet," Flurry said. "On the street level is something different."

Montclair's bike-and-walk friendliness grinds to a halt at Bloomfield Avenue. This deficit is a primary driver in the Montclair Center Business Improvement District creating a consortium that resulted in Together North Jersey's Bloomfield Avenue Corridor Plan, Flurry said.

The plan is a five-intersection study of the four-mile stretch of Bloomfield Avenue beginning at the Garden State Parkway in Bloomfield and ending at Lakeside Avenue in Verona.

Montclair's Six Corners' intersection near Church Street and the corners of Valley Road and Bloomfield Avenue are two of the chosen intersections.

Flurry said that he hopes changes to the corridor such as better pedestrian crosswalks and getting drivers to follow speed limits will aid in making Bloomfield Avenue more accessible to the alternative modes of transportation of walking and biking.

Long-term parking solutions are also needed, Flurry noted. Due to temporal parking limits, customers now drive from place to place in the district rather than take long strolls.

Flurry said that, until a mother feels safe in crossing Bloomfield Avenue while pushing a stroller and pulling along another child, more work needs to be done.

"The pedestrian wayfinding system installed in half of the BID has had a noticeable impact on foot traffic, but the district still has far to go," Flurry said. "One of the biggest improvements in Montclair Center has been the addition of bike racks to let bicyclists know that we welcome them. Unfortunately, nobody has let the drivers know this."

In a study examining bicycle crashes in New Jersey from 2009 to 2011, Bloomfield Avenue was deemed Essex County's most dangerous roadway for bicyclists with 29 total accidents, according to Cyndi Steiner, a Montclair resident and executive director of the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition.

Steiner said that Bloomfield Avenue provides some unique, hectic challenges. Vehicles travel at high speeds and, with two lanes going in either direction, there is seldom room for cyclists. Vehicles consistently stop short in left lanes to make turns, and backups behind buses in the right lane result in frustration, she said.

"Nobody is happy, pedestrians, bicyclists, drivers," observed Steiner. "It's a corridor designed for 1950s thinking, when we didn't have the traffic ... It needs to be overhauled to accommodate all road users."

The positive news, Steiner said, is that road improvements for bicyclists tend to help pedestrians and vice versa, meaning that a few changes could change traffic flow on Bloomfield Avenue to improve safety and comfort for all users.

Steiner credited the work that Montclair's Engineering Department has done with elements of the corridor, but added that with plenty of bike-friendly roads on either side of Bloomfield Avenue, she and other cyclists simply try to avoid the avenue at times.

### **Not Waiting For Fairies**

"We don't want people to avoid Bloomfield Avenue," rebuts Laura Torchio, board member and past president of Bike & Walk Montclair.

Torchio said that the perceived disconnect between Montclair's reputation as a bicycle-and-pedestrian-friendly municipality and concerns on Bloomfield Avenue is not necessarily a bad thing and may even be needed to advance efforts.

"When you're recognized for something, it makes you want to raise the bar," Torchio said of Montclair's bike-friendly and pedestrian-friendly honors. "It makes you want to rise up and meet the challenge. There's disconnect. There's different opinions. And that's okay. It's okay to have disconnect. That accentuates demand. That creates the dialogue."

The dialogue and recognitions of Montclair's standing as a place for alternate modes of transportation has a positive impact on the state of Montclair's roads regardless of infrastructure improvements, Torchio opined, as it increases public awareness that Montclair's streets are intended for multiple means of getting around.

More tangible solutions can be developed in the township's Master Plan, Torchio said, where a bike-and-pedestrian plan needs to be developed. Earlier drafts of the Master Plan promoted densities and growth that would accommodate increased utilization of public transit, another potential solution, according to Torchio.

Torchio said that increased public transit, and a better awareness of such options, could alleviate congestion and parking issues along Bloomfield Avenue.

However, successful transit requires a robust ridership, and a robust ridership requires population density, Torchio said.

In the meantime, Torchio said that the most important thing to develop is public dialogue as to what the public wants from its roadways.

"There's no such thing as a bike-lane fairy," Torchio said. "It's about us talking about what our needs are. If we want to improve quality of life, we need to start talking about ways to improve that. If getting around by bike is one of those ways, we need to prioritize it. If we, as a community, want walkability, we need to prioritize."

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