

PROFILE: LIFE IN THE BIKE LANE YIELDS UNIQUE VIEW OF SAFETY, BUSINESS, COMMUTING

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For Cyndi Steiner, executive director of New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition, cycling is both passion and profession



Cyndi Steiner, executive director of the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition

Who she is: Cyndi Steiner, executive director of New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition.

Age: 51

Home: Montclair

What she does: NJBWC advocates for legislation and projects that promote biking and walking for enjoyment, health, and transportation; make biking and walking safer; and improve road access for non-motorists.

Her background: Steiner grew up on Maryland's rural Eastern Shore, attended Cornell University, and for 19 years worked in information systems at Ernst & Young, the multinational audit and professional services firm. Along the way she earned a master's degree from Stevens Institute of Technology in information systems management. At Ernst & Young she also created an environmental-awareness club that worked to reduce the company's ecological footprint.

Changing gears: Steiner left Ernst & Young in 2009 to pursue a master's in environmental science at Rutgers University and in 2012 attended NJBWC's annual Bike and Walk Summit. As a bicycle rider and racer for 17 years, she was instantly hooked on the importance of bike advocacy and applied for the executive director position.

Why she chose this cause: "When I learned at the summit how important having a bicycling infrastructure is to safety and the economic value for communities, that it was so much more than just someone riding a bicycle, I knew that it had tremendous opportunity for New Jersey, being our nation's most densely populated state -- that the bicycle could really solve a lot of our state's problems," Steiner said.

"Initially I looked at it from an environmental science perspective, which is truly where my heart is. The bicycle is good at reducing congestion, and there are all the other environmental benefits of removing cars from the road. But as I've gotten more involved, I've learned how much importance the safety aspect has, and the economic benefits to communities," she said.

The safety issue: Many downtown main streets in New Jersey are highways, as in Bloomfield, Asbury Park, Vineland, and parts of Burlington County along Route 130. The presence of walkers and bicyclists next to cars moving at high speed contributes to the state having one of the highest pedestrian/cyclist fatality rates in the country, Steiner said. Over 30 percent of people killed on the roads are not in cars or other motorized vehicles, twice the national average.

"At the federal level, at the state level, we've worked very hard to make our roads safer for drivers. Our interstate highway system is very safe now, with wider roads, and wider lanes. But we're lagging sorely behind on making our roads safer for bike riders and pedestrians," she said.

The access issue: New Jersey has an extensive road system that makes travel convenient -- but only for automobiles. Existing bike lanes generally lack safe connectors and infrastructure to make them useful.

"If you were to take a map of New Jersey bike lanes, right now, and remove everything else, it would look like just spaghetti thrown on a wall. They don't connect," she said. "It's a bike lane here for a mile, a mile over there. It's done very haphazardly and without any thought to connecting them, and that people would use this as transportation."

"It's perceived as, 'Oh, let's put a little bike lane in here, and someone can come ride on a Sunday afternoon for a mile.' That's not going to get anybody to work, it's not going to get you from A to B, you're not going to use it to run your errands. We need to think about much broader connectivity. A bike lane in this town needs to connect to a bike lane in that town, and in this county to that county," she said.

The economic issue: Drivers on high-speed downtown streets often don't stop to patronize businesses, and improving access to those districts for slower-moving bikers and walkers benefits shops, Steiner said. Projects in New York City, Washington State, Oregon, Colorado, California, and other places have shown the economic benefits of slowing traffic, adding parking, and creating safe bike lanes and sidewalks.

New Jersey's first "parking-protected" bike lane, placed between the curb and a row of parked cars, was installed on Newark's [Mt. Prospect Avenue](#) in 2014. The loss of double-parking space hurt businesses, so Mayor Ras Baraka temporarily allowed cars to park in the bike lanes. But the subsequent addition of parking meters and time limits created more short-term parking, and the bike lanes were reopened last summer.

"Those businesses initially were opposed, but from what we're hearing, now they're wondering what more can they do to encourage bike riders to come. How can they expand this?" Steiner said.

Success stories: After Hurricane Sandy, the state Department of Transportation's federally funded rebuilding plan for Route 35 between Bay Head and Island Beach State Park initially included no bike lanes. NJBWC and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign argued that the plan does not follow the state's own "complete streets" policy, which requires roads to accommodate all users.

In response the DOT added bike lanes or shared-lane markings along 12.5 miles of road -- though Steiner said some lanes were built to outdated standards, without buffer space to protect bikes from car doors. TSTC has also criticized [the absence of lanes](#) in some places and other design flaws.

NJBWC was part of a coalition that successfully lobbied for expanded bicycle access across the George Washington Bridge. Stairs will be removed, ramps will be added, and bike and pedestrian capacity will be doubled over 10 years as part of a cable-replacement project.

Setbacks: Last month Gov. Chris Christie pocket-vetoed dozens of bills passed late in the legislative session, including a unanimously approved bill to create a Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety Advisory Council. The 18-member council would have included legislators, representatives of several state agencies, regional-planning authorities, and the public. It would make planning recommendations pertaining to bike and pedestrian issues, review driver-training programs, and analyze laws and regulations with an eye toward improving safety.

She noted that the bill has already been reintroduced as [S-631](#). NJBWC also supports a four-foot Safe Passing Law, [A-1348](#), which would require drivers to give bicyclists a wide berth. It's passed out of Assembly committee but the Senate transportation committee has refused to consider it, she said.

Implementation of complete streets policies often face opposition, at least initially, from local officials, businesses, and residents. Earlier this month, Hoboken's city council [rejected a proposal](#) for protected bike lanes on the busy Washington Street corridor in favor of unprotected bike lanes and shared lanes with "sharrow" (or shared-lane) markings. And last fall, Asbury Park's mayor announced he had persuaded the DOT to [drop a plan](#) to reduce the number of lanes on the business district's accident-prone Main Street/Route 71. The town's many cyclists "are being put at risk, because the road isn't safe to ride," Steiner argued.

Understanding the opposition: "The biggest obstacle we have in New Jersey to getting these things done is not cost," Steiner said. "Many times towns will say, 'Oh, we can't afford that.' It's

not cost. It's political will. It's the desire to improve what we have, versus clinging to 'what we've always done.'"

In Hoboken, for example, businesses would rather keep the flawed system they have, in which business owners take up the street parking, customers illegally double-park, and there are no bike lanes, she said. They fear a switch to protected bike lanes, parking meters and garage parking, despite the promised benefits, she said.

"It's really just a fear of change, and this perception that the way we're doing it now is the best way to do it, and there's no reason to change," Steiner said. "But what towns should understand is that, sure, change is difficult, and for a little while it's going to feel annoying and even painful to go through it. But once you're past that you're not going to remember what it was like before, and you're going to realize the benefits, and life will go on."

When she's not working: Steiner does road racing with the Montclair Cyclists club and recently began riding mountain bikes with the hope of racing them as well. She's also a history buff, and combines her interests in week-long bike touring trips around Europe.

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