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## **Road Warriors Fight to Take Streets from Cars**

*by Diccon Hyatt*

A blood soaked snowbank and the mangled remains of a tricycle marked the spot on Dutch Neck Road in East Windsor where a car rammed into Edward Boye on a February morning in 2010. Boye, 54, had cerebral palsy and used a tricycle to get around.

The driver of the Toyota Camry that plowed into him that morning had taken ambien and was later convicted of assault for her role in the crash. But as cycling advocates pointed out in the days after the accident, there was another factor besides impaired driving: Boye had been in the street in the first place because there was nowhere else for him to go. Like many disabled people, Boye did not own a car or drive. He was pedaling down a road that had not been designed with people like him in mind, but was optimized for cars driving at high speed.

Crashes like the one that claimed Boye's life are part of what motivates Barbara McCann, director of the office of Safety, Energy, and the Environment in the Policy Office of the secretary of the U.S. Department of transportation. She has been pushing for a complete shift in the way planners and citizens think about the roads they drive, ride, walk, or bike on every day. In her job with the Obama administration, as well as her previous job as head of an advocacy group, the Complete Streets Coalition, McCann has called for roads to be made safer places for all of their users, not just drivers.

Last year 164 pedestrians and 18 cyclists were killed in car crashes in New Jersey. It is a smaller number than the 277 drivers and 95 passengers killed that year, but proportionally much larger compared to the number of accidents. Cars going 20 mph had a 5 percent chance of killing a pedestrian, and the fatality rate jumps to 85 percent at 40 mph.

To McCann, these deaths are the inevitable consequence of a transportation network that was built to allow cars to drive at high speeds while neglecting the needs of people to get around if they don't happen to have 3,000 pounds of metal protecting them.

"We know that a lot of pedestrian fatalities take place because there is a disconnect built into roads. The standards are aimed at automobiles when there is more going on than just moving cars," she said.

McCann will be the main speaker at the New Jersey Bike & Walk Summit, held Saturday, February 27, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Princeton University. The meeting is a statewide gathering of biking and walking advocates, elected leaders, urban planners, experts, and

other people with a stake in transportation issues. Tickets are \$55. For more information, visit [www.njbwc.org](http://www.njbwc.org).

The group hosting the summit, the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition, is a group engaged in an intense fight over how to use the public right-of-way. On one side is the status quo, which puts automobiles first and bicyclists, walkers, and transit users second if they are considered at all. On the other side are the groups fighting to claw back every foot of pavement they can from the automobile to create what McCann dubbed "complete streets."

The battles are fought every time a new road is built or an old one is updated. The battle also heats up every time there is a serious pedestrian accident. In 2014 in West Windsor, 77-year-old Xuande Guo was crossing Clarksville Road at Hawk Drive, just around the corner from his home and a stone's throw from Maurice Hawk Elementary School. Police told reporters Guo "stepped in front of" a car and was struck, later dying of his injuries.

Xuande's son Tao Guo wrote a letter to the editor of the West Windsor-Plainsboro News a month later, asking not for prosecution of the motorist, but for improvements to the road to make it less likely that someone else would die in the same way.

"In the past several years, there have been quite a few accidents involving cars and pedestrians. We believe it is time for the township to take action to enhance the traffic rules and the protection of pedestrians.

"For example, the intersection of Clarksville and Hawk Drive is a very busy area. There is no crosswalk for pedestrians, nor a speed bump. The road in front of Maurice Hawk School is very wide. The road is wide enough for four-lane traffic. Cars speed through this school section and residential neighborhood even during school dismissal time.

"Each day commuters from our neighborhood walk across Clarksville to the train station; parents cross through the street to send their children to Maurice Hawk School or to use the playground. The library, Senior Center, Post Office, and Arts Center are all popular destinations for pedestrians from our neighborhood. We strongly suggest the township add a crosswalk and speed bumps at this intersection. We also suggest the township examine other areas to make appropriate improvements.

"My family has lost a devoted husband, a caring father, and a loving grandpa. We hope such tragedy will never happen again in our town," Guo wrote.

The organizers of the Walk and Bike Summit have made a statement by holding it in Princeton. The municipality was one of eight in the state, along with Lawrence Township, to have signed up for the Department of Transportation's yearlong Mayor's Challenge. In a resolution passed by the town council, Princeton's leaders pledged to take a "complete streets" approach to planning road projects, improve bicycle and pedestrian travel, gather data on people who bike and walk, and make other efforts to make life better for walkers.

Route 1 is a classic example of a road that was built during a time when the automobile was king. From Trenton to New Brunswick, the road is broad, arrow-straight, and presents a landscape that is unfriendly or openly hostile to pedestrians. Overpasses with sidewalks allow safe passage across the highway, though these are few and far between.

Also visible on Route 1 are symbols of the conflicting intentions of planners and the disorganized execution of ideas by the many government agencies that fund, plan, and build roads. At many intersections there are curb cuts, built to government standards, so that

wheelchairs can get onto the curb from the street — but more often than not, these ramps are not connected to a sidewalk — they're just a patch of concrete in the middle of some grass.

And yet there are people who brave the sea of automobiles to walk along the road. The telltale signs of them are the "goat paths" — areas of trampled grass — along the sides of the freeway. Although no sidewalk has been provided, people walk there nonetheless. McCann has been noticing what she has dubbed "homemade pedestrian facilities" for a long time. "It's really just a crude indicator," she says. "Sometimes there are people who say, 'Look at this big arterial road, nobody walks here.' But they are walking here because we can see that they've actually worn a path in the grass."

McCann says many of the people traveling "goat paths" are lower income people or those with disabilities. They could be workers at those big suburban shopping centers, or moms trying to get their kids to daycare. She believes they deserve better than having to tramp through the grass past cars flying by to reach their destinations.

McCann, who travels to her Washington job via bike or the metro, grew up in Seattle and later Atlanta, where her father was a pediatrician and her mother was a city planner. "She was civic-minded," McCann recalls. "When I was a small child, she took me to a rally in support of a combined transit service in King County (Georgia.) I think she had an influence on me being interested in how to make better policy."

McCann earned a bachelor's degree in anthropology and journalism at Georgia State University, graduating in 1985. She then went to work for CNN as a writer and producer for 12 years. While working at CNN in Atlanta, she braved Atlanta's car-centric highways on her bicycle to get to work. Although cyclists only make up about 6 percent of commuters today, it was even less back then, and fewer still were women. McCann says women make up a quarter of those who bike to work. The bike commute gave her a unique perspective on urban planning.

"I became aware of the deficiencies and the ways that planning was not taking into account the needs of people on foot and bicycle very well," she said. "I saw it as really a societal issue that was having a really big impact on growth and on quality of life for a lot of people."

After leaving CNN in 1998, McCann worked for several advocacy groups before founding the National Complete Streets Coalition in 2005, which she headed until 2012. In 2014 she joined the DOT. Along the way, she wrote several books including 2013's "Completing our Streets: The Transition to Safe and Inclusive Transportation Networks" (see excerpts, pages 29 and 30).

She says changing the system from the inside isn't easy but that she has found many people receptive to her calls for change. "It's a different way of making a difference," she says. "The neat thing about the transportation department right now is that there is a lot of energy to change and a lot of interest in making improvements."

McCann says improvements can be made even to corridors like Route 1, which initially seem hostile to pedestrian activity. Indeed, the state department of transportation has initiated a program to improve Route 1 farther north, in Middlesex County. McCann says that suburban arterial roads are not going to be made into urban boulevards with brick sidewalks right away, but that changes can be made to reduce car traffic.

In her book, McCann notes that suburban corridors with a lot of shopping centers and other destinations are perfect candidates for improved transit systems. For example, a lane could be set aside for use by buses. She says that other improvements can gradually be made, such as safer pedestrian crossings and good sidewalks. "Over time that will make it safe and more attractive and livable," she said.

McCann says businesses also have a role to play. She says shopping centers, even if they are in car-centric locations, benefit from being made walkable by adding pedestrian connections between businesses and different developments.

The same goes for office parks. For example, an isolated suburban campus could have a bike sharing service so its employees could bike to lunch and run errands. However, for that to work, the bicycles need bike-friendly roadways in the local town to travel on.

McCann says her goal is not to change everything in one grand pronouncement or policy, but to slowly change the way people think and chip away at the problem of purely car-oriented roads. In her book, McCann notes that change comes at the margins.

"It isn't about simply doing more of the things you want to change; it's about finding the small factors that will help "tip" the balance to create fundamental transformation. Changing the way we build our communities requires something more than coming up with the perfect design template or even a new policy proposal. The success of the complete streets movement shows how important it is to reframe the way we think and talk about long-standing built environment issues."