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Public Safety | Montclair

Pedestrian Fatalities Remain Hard to Cut

By NATE SCHWEBER

MONTCLAIR

AS he was sifting through the gruesome details of several fatal accidents in which pedestrians and cyclists were hit by cars, Arnold Anderson, a vehicular homicide investigator in Essex County, detected a pattern: most pedestrian deaths happen in crosswalks.

Mr. Anderson, who works for the county prosecutor's office, decided to put together an unusual sting operation in Montclair and South Orange in which plainclothes police officers would attempt to cross the streets at several locations to see if drivers stopped for them. Other officers waiting up the street stopped drivers who had not yielded to the pedestrians, and issued them either warnings or tickets.

During the operation, dubbed Cops in Crosswalks, the percentage of motorists who stopped rose from 11 percent in June to 49 percent in August, and more than 800 drivers received \$100 traffic-violation tickets, said Sgt. Daniel Pronti, of the Montclair Police Department.

"Most people who committed the violations weren't even aware they committed a violation," Sergeant Pronti said. "We learned that education was key to our ultimate goal of making people feel safe."

In the Garden State, where residents love their cars, officials have been trying for years to reduce the high number of pedestrian deaths. In 1998, after 145 cyclists and pedestrians had died the year before, Gov. [Christie Whitman](#) introduced a program intended to cut that number in half by 2010.

The goal has never been met. Last year, 162 pedestrians and cyclists died in traffic deaths, although the number was down 9 percent from the year before, according to the Tri-State Transportation Committee, a New Jersey, New York and Connecticut group that issued a report in July.

Gov. [Jon S. Corzine](#), who made it a priority to spend more on bicycle and pedestrian safety, said in September, "This is a place where we think we can save a lot of lives in urban and suburban communities."

He said the state would invest in signs, signals, lights and infrastructure changes like wider road shoulders and speed bumps.

Communities throughout the state have started their own programs to prevent pedestrian deaths. Last month, West Orange sponsored a "Put the Brakes on Fatalities Day" in which officers increased patrols to detect driving violations as part of a national effort.

The Tri-State Transportation Committee's executive director, Kate Slevin, said that while the fatality statistics showed a positive trend, they did not reflect fast enough progress.

“You see the number of fatalities go up and down a little,” she said, “but you don’t see a steep decline.” Pamela S. Fischer, director of the New Jersey Division of Traffic Safety, said that the state was in the third year of a five-year pedestrian and bicyclist safety plan started by Governor Corzine. She said the state was working with municipalities to do things like make crosswalks and signs more visible.

Nonetheless, she said higher gas prices this summer might have contributed to what she described as a “huge uptick” in cyclist deaths this year. Eighteen cyclists had died in New Jersey through the third week in September, up from five at this time last year. So far there have been 87 pedestrian deaths, compared to 89 by this time last year.

“With gas prices being what they are, people are looking for ways to save money,” she said. “I like to say that people have rediscovered their feet.”

The state will spend \$10.5 million on bicycle and pedestrian safety programs in 2009, said Erin Phalon, a spokeswoman for the Transportation Department. She added that there was more than \$20 million available to be spent on capital improvements like pedestrian bridges, sidewalks, crosswalks and bicycle-compatible roadway upgrades.

A Tri-State Transportation Committee Report released last month listed the state’s most dangerous roads for pedestrians, all of them wide speedways. The top two on the list were Route 30 in Atlantic County and Route 130 in Burlington County; since 2005, nine pedestrians have died on each. In that same time, according to the report, eight pedestrians died on Route 1 in Middlesex County and eight others on Route 9 in Ocean County.

Yet, in September, the League of American Bicyclists ranked New Jersey ninth best in the nation for bicycle safety. Elizabeth Kiker, a spokeswoman for the organization, said the state tied for third in the nation for cycle- and pedestrian-friendly planning, was eighth in the nation for policies and programs and was tenth in the nation for safe infrastructure.

John Boyle, advocacy director for the Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia, said that New Jersey had good policies but that they were not always put into effect.

“Until you get the state guidelines implemented at a municipal level, which is where pedestrian walking and bicycling happens, you’ve got a long way to go,” he said.

New Jersey often lacks the money to buy private property along roads on which to build shoulders and paths for bikes and pedestrians, said Peter Bilton, project manager at the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at [Rutgers University](#).

“The most expensive part of roadway expansion is purchasing property adjacent to the road,” he said.

Big roads, with enough room for cars, cyclists and pedestrians, are what enable Erik Eklund, a designer, to ride his recumbent bicycle several times a week.

“The beauty about riding in Montclair is there are a lot of streets that are wide enough to accommodate bikes and be safe,” Mr. Eklund said.

Peter Kasabach, executive director of New Jersey Future, a nonprofit smart-growth advocacy group, said places like Montclair were uncommon. “When we plan our infrastructure, whether it’s urban or rural, we generally don’t take into account people who walk and bike,” he said. “And then we’re surprised when people don’t walk or bike around.”

In Parsippany, another town that has worked to make roads safer for nondrivers, Rich Patel, 51, said he feels safe, even walking the medians of busy Route 46 to his job at a hotel.

“Everywhere I walk or ride my bicycle is good,” he said.

Because of the density of New Jersey’s population, and the age of most of its infrastructure, progress will be slow, said Ranjit Walia, senior research specialist for the Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers.

“Our current infrastructure and current laws took decades to make,” he said. “It’s going to take time to make that change.”

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