

South Florida roadways not just dangerous for cars



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With snow and ice piling up in much of the country, Florida may be a vacation dream for many travelers. But its congested roads, bad infrastructure, irresponsible drivers and lax enforcement make it a nightmare for those who routinely travel on foot and by bicycle. Simply taking a stroll or jumping on your bike for exercise or pleasure has become a real-life game of Frogger.

According to The National Complete Streets Coalition's yearly Pedestrian Danger Index, in 2014, Orlando, Tampa, Jacksonville and Miami ranked as the top four most unsafe cities in the country for those on foot.

The latest tragic local example occurred last week in **Boynton Beach**, when teenager Khair Raymond was struck and killed by a driver while walking home from a basketball game at **Boynton Beach** High School. The driver left the scene of the accident and was arrested a week later.

According to the Florida Highway Patrol, these types of incidents are becoming far too routine, with an average of 1,300 hit and runs in the state each year.

For cyclists, it's even more treacherous. The Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles reports an average of more than 100 riders are killed each year and nearly 5,000 are injured in Florida accidents. About three in every 10 crashes occur in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports about 1 in 6 of the nation's fatal bicycle accidents occur in Florida each year, making it the most dangerous state in the nation for cyclists.

Again raising awareness of the dangers cyclists face, a 51-year-old rider was killed and another seriously injured last week by a drunken driver on one of Miami's most infamous roadways, the Rickenbacker Causeway. It's the fourth cyclist death on that stretch of road in the past nine years caused by an impaired driver.

Miami architect Bernard Zyscovich began speaking out about the causeway's dangers after the 2012 death of fellow cyclist Aaron Cohen, also killed by a drunken driver.

So, why such mayhem in South Florida? Zyscovich says international drivers combine to make conditions especially treacherous.

"Part of what happens with that is that many people who are new to this environment that are driving with different habits and different histories," he said

Zyscovich is proposing a plan called Plan Z For Miami that would convert part of the Rickenbacker Causeway to a park, freeing up space for riders and walkers. And he's working up similar safety redesigns for other parts of the city.

"This could become a really bike-centric city if we could all get organized to create safe and protected pathways like Portland and Seattle and some of the other model cities have run, where you just feel totally safe in being able to do that."

Miami-Dade County mayor Carlos Gimenez called the safety of cyclists and pedestrians a "top transportation priority," pledging to work with fellow leaders to address the issue to prevent more tragedies in the future. But actions speak louder than words.

Broward County's "Complete Streets" plan, enacted last year, pledges to make roads safer for pedestrians by narrowing driving lanes to give more space for cyclists to navigate. West Palm Beach and other **Palm Beach County** cities have also been building new roads with pedestrians in mind under new master plans.

But many existing roads simply aren't suitable, with little or no sidewalks and scant room for bicycles. Florida law mandates a 3 foot space be allowed for cyclists on roadways. But many motorists tend to ignore this rule, instead honking at bikes in their path. The violation doesn't carry much weight. It's a noncriminal traffic infraction that carries a \$60 fine and three points on the license.

During its upcoming session, the Florida Legislature should take a closer look at pedestrian safety. At least one member has gotten the message. A bill proposed by state Rep. Kathleen Passidomo, R-Naples, would increase the penalties for drivers who harm pedestrians and make it illegal for drivers to cut off them off when making right turns.

Passidomo's bill also would clarify the three-foot rule, to ensure it includes the widest part of a vehicle, like a side mirror.

It's a start. But much more must be done to improve Florida's reputation as the state where pedestrians and bicyclists are unsafe at any speed.

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