

PEDESTRIAN AND BICYCLIST SAFETY IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MD

INTRODUCTION

Between 2004 and 2007, Montgomery County police received reports on 1,695 collisions involving pedestrians. This is an average of 430 collisions annually, more than one a day, with a yearly average of 14 fatalities. In 2006, there were 18 fatal pedestrian collisions, which exceeded the number of homicides that year. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration, a pedestrian is killed or injured every seven minutes. According to "Mean Streets 2004," a report on pedestrian safety by the Surface Transportation Policy Project, 17% of all traffic fatalities in our region involve pedestrians, yet the states are spending only one-half of one percent of their federal transportation dollars on pedestrian safety.

In 2003, 46,000 bicyclists were injured in traffic crashes and 622 were killed nationwide: 23% of all bicyclists killed were under the age of 16; 66% of the fatalities occurred in urban areas, 67% were at non-intersection locations and 30% were between the hours of 5 pm and 9 pm.

Our area's population is becoming older and more diverse, with an increasing number of residents who aren't familiar with English and our urban landscape. Approximately one-third of our population does not drive. This includes 21% of Americans over 65, all children under 16 and many low-income Americans who cannot afford automobiles. A greater interest in finding non-polluting, healthier ways to make trips is developing as the county becomes more densely populated, gas prices rise and global warming concerns grow. As Montgomery County planners are working toward the goal of creating walkable, bikable communities, the challenge lies in how to retrofit our car oriented streetscapes into places safe for more energy-efficient travel. With no positions that allow us to speak to these issues, the League of Women Voters adopted a study on Pedestrian and Bike Safety at the 2007 Annual Meeting.

BACKGROUND

Concern about the unacceptable rate of accidents involving pedestrians led then County Executive Douglas Duncan to establish a Montgomery County Blue Ribbon Panel on Pedestrian and Traffic Safety in June, 2000. The panel's task was to study and formulate an action plan to reduce pedestrian deaths and injuries and create pedestrian friendly communities. The panel adopted the three E's approach to study pedestrian traffic safety: Education, Enforcement and Engineering. A summary of the panel's January 2002 *Final Report* follows:

General Findings and Recommendations

- Designate a senior level position within the Executive Branch of the county to coordinate and implement ongoing pedestrian and traffic safety activities. Establish a formal county executive-appointed advisory board.

Education Findings

- No sustained public education program exists to reach motorists and pedestrians to make them aware of their responsibilities.
- Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) have no required unit on pedestrian safety.
- The State of Maryland has no section on pedestrian safety in the Drivers Handbook, the handbook is not available in other languages and only one pedestrian safety-related question is included on the Maryland State drivers licensing exam.
- There are no data on the ethnicity of pedestrians suffering injuries.
- Pedestrian safety is not addressed in ESOL classes for new residents.

Education Recommendations

- Montgomery County must take the lead in undertaking a comprehensive, ongoing public awareness/social-marketing campaign.

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- A pedestrian safety curriculum should be included as a mandatory unit in school health programs/classes in grades K through 8. Pedestrian safety segments should be included in all ESOL classes.
- The state should expand pedestrian safety material in the Motor Vehicle Administration (MVA) handbook and private driver training schools course curriculum. The MVA driver's exam should include mandatory questions about pedestrian safety and a segment on the topic should be included in driver improvement classes.

Enforcement Findings

- No ongoing pedestrian safety campaign exists in Montgomery County by county police, and there is little support for pedestrian crossing compliance checks.
- Red light running is a pervasive problem.
- Regardless of age, pedestrians involved in crashes are more likely to be killed as vehicle speeds increase. The fatality rate for pedestrians hit by a car at 20 mph is 5% and jumps to 80% when speed is increased to 40 mph.

Enforcement Recommendations

- Step-up and maintain an ongoing and visible pedestrian safety enforcement effort to combat aggressive driving, drunk driving, red light running, excessive speeding and jaywalking.
- Increase enforcement of pedestrian right-of-way in crosswalks, with special emphasis in cluster areas such as central business districts and high-collision hot-spot locations.
- Increase resources for enforcement. Improve collection and publication of data on traffic safety law enforcement.
- Involve the public in pedestrian safety efforts.

Engineering Findings

- The majority of the Montgomery County transportation system is inadequate and outdated in pedestrian-friendly engineering design. Roadways have been designed and constructed to accommodate vehicular traffic rather than pedestrians, leaving pedestrians at great risk and discouraging walking.
- The county lacks engineering options that make it easy for pedestrians to cross streets, provide convenient and safe access parallel to roadways and offer connectivity between neighborhoods, commercial, transit, recreational centers and schools.
- Traffic-controlled crosswalks are insufficient in number, and not enough time is provided for pedestrians to cross safely.
- Crosswalks are difficult for drivers and pedestrians to see; lighting levels on major roadways are lower than national standards; and there is inadequate funding for needed changes.
- Crash data are not processed in a timely manner.

Engineering Recommendations

- Montgomery County and the State of Maryland should implement a Pedestrian Safety Engineering Tool Box that contains many of the most effective and innovative engineering options available. These tools include countdown pedestrian signals, in-pavement crosswalk lights, narrowing roads at cross walks and other traffic-calming techniques.
- These solutions should address three primary pedestrian safety needs:
 - adequate pedestrian access parallel to roadways
 - the ability of all pedestrians to safely cross roadways
 - safe-walking routes that connect community facilities.
- The county should require all public and private construction projects to include a Pedestrian Impact Statement including a process for review by the county to maximize pedestrian safety and access.
- Montgomery County should carry out a county-wide Safe Routes to Schools program to maximize safety and access for students at all schools within the limits set for bus service. There should be safe routes for students walking to bus stops.
- The county should reassess the adequacy of all pedestrian signal timings, relocate mid-block bus stops closer to intersections, provide safe ADA-compatible crossings at all bus stops and locate building entrances with ADA-compatible crossings.

- Install additional signals and reduce number of right-turns-on-reds or limit them to off-peak hours in Central Business Districts (CBD).
- Review speed limits on county and state roads; include public compliance with posted speed limits as part of the performance measures of both the county police and the former Department of Public Works and Transportation (DPWT), now Department of Transportation.
- Include a plan to control speeds during off-peak hours as part of road widening projects.
- Pedestrian crossing signs should be replaced with new fluorescent yellow/green signs in all school zones.
- Place *Stop for Pedestrian* paddle signs at roadway centerlines at all unsignalized crosswalks in CBDs.
- Fund the crosswalk-stripping program.
- Revise the lighting policy for state roads to reflect the recommendations of the Illuminating Engineering Society of North America (IESNA), which is the policy being adopted by DPWT.
- Assess existing light levels and remediate as needed.
- Adopt the American Association of State Highway and Transit Officials' (AASHTO) recommendations for barriers to protect pedestrians on bridges and along roadways.
- Locate ADA-compliant handicap ramps to provide the safest and shortest crossing for pedestrians.
- Designate the pedestrian safety coordinator as the staff person responsible for disseminating ADA information within DPWT.
- Provide adequate funding to DPWT for necessary engineering changes to meet the current challenges.

Legislative Recommendations

- Establish a Homicide by Aggressive Driving statute and a Felony Hit and Run statute.
- Enact legislation to allow the use of photo enforcement cameras to ticket speeding vehicles
- Increase the state's share of building sidewalks and bicycle paths along state roads to 80%.
- Double the fines against traffic law violators in school zones.
- Remove the "must appear in court" provision in MD law TR 21-502, Pedestrians' Right-of-Way in Crosswalks (2) and (c).
- Increase penalties against repeat offenders of traffic safety laws and drunk drivers. Institute a new penalty targeted at drivers blocking crosswalks and intersections (Don't Block the Box).
- Enact budgets that increase funding for traffic safety enforcement, education and engineering. Conduct a thorough review of the state pedestrian law violations to determine if the severity of the penalty is commensurate with the offense to ensure it serves as an effective deterrent.

CURRENT COUNTY PROGRAMS AND PROJECTS

Pedestrian Safety Advisory Committee

In 2002, the Montgomery County Council established a committee to advise the County Executive, County Council and elected officials on priorities and needs in the area of pedestrian and bicycle safety. The 17-member advisory committee includes six government representatives, one public school representative, one Maryland Municipal League representative, eight general public members who represent various regions of Montgomery County and one representative of the bicycle advocacy community. Although some progress has been made on nearly all of the recommendations of the blue ribbon panel, there is a long way to go to fully implement them. Therefore, in June of 2007, the council voted to extend the advisory committee and its mandate until 2012.

Pedestrian Safety Initiative

The 2002 blue ribbon report provided the framework for many of the improvements that have been put in place since the panel began its work. In order to build on that effort, in December of 2007, Montgomery County Executive Isiah Legget released his Pedestrian Safety Initiative, which focuses on seven strategies:

1. Target pedestrian safety improvements in high incidence areas.
2. Assess and improve pedestrian network and connectivity needs.
3. Increase emphasis on pedestrians and bicyclists in the planning process.
4. Identify and implement corridor and intersection modification and traffic calming treatments.
5. Upgrade pedestrian signals.

6. Assess and enhance street lighting.
7. Modify pedestrian and driver behavior through enhanced enforcement and educational efforts.

In order to begin work on Strategy #1, yearly crash data were examined to determine the areas with the highest frequency of pedestrian collisions. In the initial year the Colesville Road corridor from East-West Highway to Spring Street, Georgia Avenue corridor from Thayer Avenue to Spring Street in downtown Silver Spring, Piney Branch Road corridor from Flower Avenue to Carroll Avenue in Takoma Park and Georgia Avenue corridor from Arcola Avenue to Glenallen Avenue in Wheaton will be targeted with education, enforcement, and engineering efforts aimed at improving safety. The plan anticipates continual analysis of data and a change in the focus corridors each year.

A key element of Strategy #2 is a comprehensive inventory of the sidewalk network within the urban ring and I-270 corridor. This assessment is supposed to evaluate sidewalk width and condition, gaps or dead ends requiring short links, compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act and the presence of buffer strips between the roads and sidewalks. Once needs are identified, the improvements will be prioritized based on (a) high levels of pedestrian activity (public facilities, schools, libraries etc), (b) circumstances that create unsafe or undesirable conditions for walkability and (c) sidewalks along major transit corridors.

Strategy #3 includes requiring Pedestrian and Bicyclist Safety Impact Statements as part of any park or public project and Local Area Transportation Review of any proposed private developments. All master plans and sector plans will be required to have a subsection addressing pedestrian and bicyclist access and safety.

Strategies #4, 5 and 6 require engineering improvements such as bump outs to make roads narrower at cross walks, re-timing signals to allow more time for pedestrians to cross and improved lighting.

Strategy #7 will involve an educational campaign for drivers and pedestrians, added enforcement and data collection to measure results.

Safe Routes to Schools

In 1969, about half of all students walked or bicycled to school. Today fewer than 15 % of all school trips are made by walking or bicycling, 25% percent are made on a school bus, and over 50 % of all children arrive at school in private automobiles. The purpose of the Federal Safe Routes to School Program (SRTS) is to address these issues head on. At its heart, the SRTS Program empowers communities to make walking and bicycling to school a safe and routine activity once again. The Program makes funding available for a wide variety of programs and projects, from building safer street crossings to establishing programs that encourage children and their parents to walk and bicycle safely to school.

Montgomery County has applied for and received two grants awarded by the Maryland State Highway Administration that are funded by the federal Safe Routes to School Program. The first grant for \$139,200 was awarded in August of 2007 to hire a Montgomery County Safe Routes to School coordinator. In October 2007, the county received \$241,500 to improve pedestrian safety and accessibility at 11 county schools and conduct 24 enforcement details at 13 schools. Another component of the program, the International Walk to School Day was carried out at 28 schools in October 2007, the highest number since the annual event began.

Takoma Park Elementary School is an example of how Safe Routes to School was taught during Walk to School Day, October 11, 2007. About 150 students and their parents walked to their school carrying signs and waving wands adorned with metallic streamers to make drivers aware of the day. Parents like the program because not only does it provide an opportunity to get exercise, but also makes students feel part of a neighborhood. Building community connections while encouraging families to walk, is a goal of the Safe Routes to School program. Workshops on safe cycling and other educational events are conducted in coordination with the school. By promoting walking, traffic jams that occur daily during hours of arrival and departure could also be reduced.

Ashburton Elementary was selected as the 2007 host school for the annual Walk to School celebration. Ashburton students have pledged to walk the equivalent of around the world over the upcoming year. The school has a very diverse population, with children from over 40 countries, and some of the students want to “walk” roundtrip to their country of origin. Each student in the school was given a pedometer by Suburban Hospital to track how much they walk every day. In preparation for Walk to School Day, students have:

- Made posters,
- Listened to daily morning announcements about pedestrian safety,
- Researched the definition of a pace or step,
- Counted steps to places throughout the building,
- Calculated the distance in miles and average number of steps to a number of local destinations and to cities in which they were born,
- Used pedometers in physical education classes,
- Helped plan the Walk to School assembly,
- Heard a presentation on pedestrian safety by AAA’s Otto the Auto for kindergarten through second graders and
- Wrote personal goals for walking next week.

Why Encourage Bike Riding?

Due to economic circumstances, the bicycle is the only form of transportation, other than walking, for some county residents. Others choose to ride bikes for pleasure, for health benefits and because it is more environmentally sound than driving or even using transit. Travel times for bicycle trips less than five miles in length are comparable to driving, particularly in urban areas where traffic congestion is high and automobile parking is limited. Bicycling also can be more efficient and flexible than transit, which has fixed routes and schedules. There is a great potential to increase the number of trips taken by bicycle in Montgomery County and the region. Nationally, approximately 60% of all daily trips are less than five miles, 50% are less than three miles and 25% are less than one mile. These distances are all well within the range of an average cyclist.

Developing a safe, continuous bikeway network that provides access to key destinations will give residents a viable option to travel by means other than driving. Bikeways can be configured in various ways. Shared use paths are 8- to 10-foot wide paved or hard-packed gravel pathways that are separated from motorized traffic. They can be used by walkers and joggers as well. A shared roadway is a roadway open to both bicycle and motor vehicle travel. Bike lanes are a portion of a roadway that has been designated by striping, signing and pavement markings for the preferential or exclusive use of bicyclists. They are 4 to 6 feet wide and are on each side of the road. A dual bikeway is a roadway that features two types of bikeways, a shared-use path and bike lanes or a shared-use path and shared roadway/travel lane.

When planning for bikeway networks, the skill and confidence level of bicyclists must be kept in mind. Advanced or experienced cyclists are generally using their bicycle as they would a motor vehicle and are comfortable riding with traffic. Creating signed shared roadways and bike lanes will most benefit this group of riders. Basic cyclists are casual adult riders who may be using their bicycle for transportation but avoid using roads with fast or busy motor vehicle traffic unless there is ample room. Therefore, they typically prefer to ride along neighborhood streets, hiker-biker trails, shared use paths and well-designed bike lanes. Improvements to facilities that separate bicycles from motor vehicles (shared use paths and bike lanes) will most benefit basic cyclists. Child cyclists require access to key destinations such as schools, community centers, recreational facilities, libraries and local retail stores. Improvements to local or neighborhood bikeways and shared-use paths will benefit all cyclists, but especially children.

TOOLS

2005 Countywide Bikeways Functional Master Plan

In March of 2005, the County Council approved the Countywide Bikeways Functional Master Plan, which was drafted by the Montgomery County Department of Park and Planning to update the 1978 Master Plan of Bikeways.

The goals of this plan are to:

- Develop an interconnected system of bikeways and trails that serves transportation and recreational needs and accommodates a variety of skill levels.
- Guide implementation by developers, public agencies and others.
- Increase the number of trips made by bicycle for both transportation and recreation.
- Make bicycling safer and more convenient for Montgomery County's residents and workforce.

This 111-page document recommends nearly 200 county-wide bikeways totaling more than 500 miles. This includes 181 miles of existing and proposed shared-use paths, 81 miles of existing and proposed bike lanes and 157 miles of proposed signed shared roadways.

Because master plans in Montgomery County typically only examine and make recommendations on physical conditions of communities, the Bikeways Functional Master Plan did not address the education, enforcement and fourth "e" of encouragement, which the authors recognized as essential for successful realization of the goals of the plan. However, some policies and programs are recommended in the appendix. These recommendations include investment in bicycle education to teach cyclists safe practices and public education to increase acceptance by both drivers and potential bicycling commuters that bicycles are legal vehicles and have as much right to use the road as motorists.

2007 Road Code

As chair of the County Council's Transportation and Environment Committee, Nancy Floreen directed a major overhaul of the Community Road Code, which governs street and road design, construction and regulation. The revised road code was adopted by the council in July 2007. Five major elements of the revision follow:

- Creates more pedestrian-friendly street environments: Streets are not just for moving motor vehicles. They must also be more compatible with neighborhood and urban environments. To provide safer conditions for drivers, pedestrians and cyclists, the regulations for new and reconstructed roads reduce the maximum width of neighborhood and business district streets, allow shorter blocks and/or mid-block crossings and tighten intersection corners to slow the cars and shorten crossing distances for pedestrians.
- Brings the former Road Construction Code and the master plans in sync. Decreases interagency confusion and disputes over variations in standards applied by these two types of county documents.
- Promotes sidewalks and hiker-biker ('shared-use') paths. Sidewalk widths are designated and required for various residential roads, with single side roads allowed only in low housing density areas. Temporary sidewalk closures are limited to 14 days in major pedestrian areas. Fee payment waivers are allowed only in cases of extreme hardship for areas where sidewalks are really not needed. The funds will be directed to the county's sidewalk construction program to allow sidewalks to be built where they are more needed. Shared use/bike paths are permitted to be an extra two feet wide, from 8 to 12 feet instead of 10. Snow must be removed from shared use/bike paths.
- Promotes street trees. Trees will improve the street environment if placed judiciously with adequate landscape panels along streets and adequate width to accommodate growth in medians.
- Adds conditions on road abandonment and closures. Adds time limits on meeting conditions of street abandonment and requires traffic control plans for temporary street or sidewalk closures for construction, allowing the county to require a covered walkway in some cases.

There are some caveats to the overhaul of the Road Code:

- The design standards are to be implemented through executive regulations prepared by a working group of executive and planning board staff with non-government stakeholders, then approved by the council. The executive has asked for a three-month extension to October 15, 2008 for submission of these regulations. A full-time position to flesh out the details of the forthcoming executive regulations was cut from the FY09 budget, under the assumption the council would not approve the regulations until more than half way through the budget year, so the use of a consultant was all that was necessary.
- The new design standards only apply to county roads, not those under the jurisdiction of the State or municipalities.

- The rules about sidewalks and widths and intersections apply to existing roads only when they are reconstructed, e.g. widened in any way, but do not apply to routine resurfacing. DPWT pushed for a change in the definition when the bill was passed in 2007 to limit the new regulations to cases of widening of more than two feet. DPWT wanted to reduce the chance that routine maintenance would cause the new design principles to take effect. The bill as adopted says “reconstruct and reconstruction include any change in the width of a road – that is, the width of the pavement or area between curbs – but do not include resurfacing a road without any change in its width.”

2007 Growth Policy

Montgomery County planners are working toward the goal of creating walkable, bikable communities, as illustrated by two of the nine public policy goals in the 2007-2009 growth policy:

- The design of the built environment should foster alternatives to the automobile for a wide variety of trips.
- Development patterns should encourage social interaction through attention to human scale, the pedestrian environment and streetscape and gathering places.

In an Oct. 11, 2007 memo to the planning board about changes to transit and auto mobility tests for future developments, the staff reiterated the need to think beyond the auto in planning future mobility. The memo stated “...the County has a vested interest in shifting as many trips as practical away from auto travel, which is for many trips a less energy-efficient travel mode than walking, biking, or taking transit.”

An example of the way the county is including pedestrian safety measures is exemplified by the following description of the Georgia Avenue Concept Study from the Montgomery County Planning web-site. “The study will analyze a variety of development scenarios for some of the large commercial properties along the road. Planners will consider urban design elements that could enhance Georgia Avenue’s appearance as well as protect residents – particularly pedestrians – through better-designed sidewalks, crosswalks, bus shelters and landscaping.” The plan will go to the planning board in June and to the County Council in July.

ISSUES AND BARRIERS TO RESOLVING THE PROBLEMS

Better coordination within and among various departments

Coordination is needed both at the county level, primarily between the Executive Branch and Park and Planning, and between the state and county transportation departments. The Road Code revisions eliminating discrepancies between guidance documents is a start, but many of our pedestrian and bicycle concerns are along highways controlled by the State Highway Administration and not directly affected by the Road Code.

Achieving balance between the needs of vehicles, bikes and pedestrians

Getting from point A to point B in the least amount of time is the desire of most drivers. Traffic planners and people in cars want vehicles to move through intersections as quickly as possible. Yet speed is the number one factor in the difference between fatalities and injuries in car/pedestrian collisions. Allowing more time for pedestrians to cross streets makes it safer for the elderly and others with limited mobility. Longer crossing times, however, mean longer waits for drivers. This push/pull is one of the biggest challenges to making our urban environment safer for walking.

While it’s easy to see the health and environmental benefits of biking, many potential cyclists are fearful of riding in traffic and many motorists don’t want to share the road. Although bikers feel safer on hiker/biker trails, the presence of bikers on shared paths intimidates some pedestrians. The resistance to sharing roads and trails makes encouraging biking more difficult. Single-use paths for hikers and bikers would solve the problem but be expensive, and constructing enough of them to form a viable transportation network would be extremely expensive.

Fiscal considerations

In December 2007, the County Executive recommended directing substantial new and existing resources to fund both operating and capital expenditures in the Pedestrian Safety Initiative over the next six years. Approximately six million dollars was designated for FY09, but by the spring release of the operating budget under tightened fiscal

predictions, most of this funding had disappeared. The final budget approved by the County Council in May restored about one million dollars for two pedestrian initiatives:

- Improved pedestrian safety along the county's four highest incident corridors, three of which are in the greater Silver Spring area (\$800,000) and
- Funds to re-assess pedestrian signal timing at all county intersections (\$175,000).

An additional \$250,000 was included for bikeway maintenance. There are also several sidewalk projects, which had been part of the capital improvements program prior to the initiative.

CONCLUSION

Montgomery County has adopted some ambitious plans to make our communities more inviting and safer for getting around without getting in our cars. However, as described above, fully implementing those plans will be a long-term challenge. What public policies can make a difference? Is this an issue that the League should take on?

References

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CONSENSUS QUESTIONS

1. Should the League support the concept that when building and rebuilding communities, designs should include incentives for using non-motorized forms of travel? ___yes ___no
2. If the answer to question 1 is yes, what elements should be in place to support this concept? (Respond ___yes ___no for each bullet. Select as many as found appropriate.)
 - Sufficient budget to initiate and sustain engineering, education and enforcement elements to encourage more people to safely walk and ride bikes.
 - Education and outreach to residents in multiple languages through multiple means.
 - Promotion of continuing driver education after passing the initial licensing exam.
 - Promotion of bicycle safety education for all age groups.
 - Increased enforcement through ticketing of dangerous behavior by drivers, pedestrians and bicyclists.
 - Narrower streets, especially at intersections, to reduce vehicular speed and crossing distances.
 - Better marked cross walks.
 - Coordination between county and state agencies and among county departments to support increasing availability of safe pedestrian and bicycle options to vehicular trips.
 - Consideration by the planning board for pedestrian and bicyclist safety in every step of the site plan approval process.
 - Ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of measures to increase both the numbers of people who are walking and biking for transportation and the safety of these activities.

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