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TRANSPORTATION

How New Jersey towns are making streets safer for pedestrians

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Two pedestrians killed in Clifton. One killed in Bergenfield. One killed in Elmwood Park. One killed in Garfield. One killed in Ridgewood. Two pedestrians hit in Dumont. One hit in Hackensack.

A spate of motor vehicle crashes involving pedestrians over the past two weeks has put the state on track for another record year of pedestrian fatalities. Last year's count of 183 fatalities was the highest in 24 years. This year's tally is up to 117 so far.

Nationwide, the 46 percent spike in pedestrian fatalities from 2009 to 2016 prompted the National Transportation Safety Board last week to call for better car and truck headlights and the inclusion of pedestrian safety in safety ratings for new cars.

In the small borough of Leonia, three to seven pedestrians were struck by cars in typical years, Police Chief Tom Rowe said.

But after the gruesome 2014 death of Fort Lee resident Leyla Kan, who was hit by a school bus at Fort Lee Road and Broad Avenue and dragged 70 feet, borough police decided she would be the borough's last victim.

In 2016, all traffic lights at the busy intersection began turning red for 26 seconds to allow pedestrians to cross in every direction at the same time with cars at a standstill. There has not been a pedestrian-related accident since.

"The results have been outstanding. They're what we were hoping for," Rowe said. "When I drive throughout the county, I look at all these crazy intersections and think there's probably more that need this."

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Road Warrior: Elmwood Park pedestrian fatality follows a deadly NJ trend

Bergenfield implemented the same all-red traffic signal at Washington Avenue and Main Street about a decade ago, giving pedestrians a 15-second cushion to safely cross the street in a popular shopping area with heavy foot traffic.

The signal, known as the "pedestrian scramble" or "Barnes Dance," was once a popular method of protecting pedestrians. First championed by traffic engineer Henry Barnes in the late 1940s, the scrambles quickly spread from Kansas City and Vancouver to cities like New York, Baltimore and Washington, D.C.

Story continues below gallery

The plight of the pedestrian soon became a secondary concern, however, as cars became more ubiquitous and traffic engineers faulted all-red traffic stops for creating extra congestion, said James Sinclair, project coordinator for the New Jersey Bicycle and Pedestrian Resource Center at Rutgers University.

Many of New Jersey's roadways were built in the 1950s and 1960s to prioritize the flow of cars over pedestrians, Sinclair said.

"They were designed exclusively to move as much traffic as possible as fast as possible, and the result of that was pedestrian and cyclist fatalities," he said.

Complete streets priorities

The state officially reversed course in 2009, when the Department of Transportation adopted a Complete Streets policy requiring all roadway improvement projects to include safe accommodations for pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders and the mobility-impaired.

Passaic and Essex counties as well as 17 municipalities in Bergen County and several in Morris County have followed suit with Complete Streets policies of their own.

The North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority launched a pedestrian safety Street Smart campaign in 2014 to complement those efforts. The authority has worked with more than 80 municipalities to redesign roadways and promote safe behavior by drivers and pedestrians through education and enforcement.

After a Street Smart campaign in Passaic in 2016, the proportion of pedestrians properly crossing Main Avenue and Monroe Street jumped from 54 percent to 85 percent while turning vehicles stopping for pedestrians increased from 46 percent to 58 percent and vehicles properly stopping at a red light or stop sign rose from 74 percent to 81 percent.

"Where we do the campaign, especially when it’s a full campaign that involves the education and outreach as well as participation by law enforcement, we see real and significant improvements in behavior by drivers and by pedestrians," said David Behrend, director of communications and government affairs for the authority. "We're hopeful that over time, by doing this in more communities, that it'll have an overall lasting impact."

Together North Jersey, a regional planning consortium that includes the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority, recently partnered with the Urban Essex Coalition for Smart Growth to apply tactical urbanism, which demonstrates what improvements like street corner extensions could look like on re-engineered roads, to train track lighting. They are developing a temporary lighting installation at train track underpasses on the inner Morris & Essex Line to show how lighting and art can be used to improve safety for pedestrians and riders and revitalize a station area, Behrend said.

“It's an approach that provides the benefits immediately and gives the community a chance to see the improvements for themselves,” Sinclair said.

Curb extensions increase visibility, decrease speed

Curb extensions, which increase visibility, force drivers to slow down and reduce the crossing distance for pedestrians, are becoming increasingly common in North Jersey. Towns like Englewood, Fair Lawnand Millburn already extended some sidewalks.

Englewood installed sidewalk “bump-outs” across four blocks of its downtown, on Palisade Avenue from William Street to Engle Street, beginning in 2014. A couple of pedestrian accident "near misses" as well as the need to make intersections handicapped-accessible prompted the city to act, said Frantz Volcy, the city's engineer.

"We’ve used it as a traffic calming device," Volcy said. "The pedestrians, especially the older population, love it because it allows them to feel safe when crossing the roadway."

Drivers have had the opposite reaction, Volcy said, frequently complaining of being slowed down too much.

"A lot of motorists are used to a certain turning radius, and when you have a bump-out, you have to slow down, make a sharper turn," Volcy said. "Where you used to be able to sneak a turn in when the light turns red, now you have to wait. You can't please everyone, but they're doing what we intended them to do."

Passaic County embarked on a $6.2 million mission this year to make the most dangerous intersections in Clifton and Paterson more pedestrian-friendly with curb extensions, high-visibility crosswalks and upgraded traffic signals. The county also recently converted a street that ran through Paterson's courthouse annex into a pedestrian plaza.

'Road diets' and re-engineering

Some municipalities, including Wayne, Cedar Grove and Little Falls, have sought to slow traffic through "road diets" that reduce the number of travel lanes. After Ratzer Road in Wayne was cut from four lanes to three, serious accidents on the high-crash road dropped by 42 percent, according to a study by Passaic County. Another road diet, on Valley Road, cut all crashes by 52 percent and serious crashes by 61 percent.

"Every road is different, but crashes have gone way down," said Charles Silverstein, Passaic County's traffic engineer.

Other towns, most notably Fort Lee, are vigorously enforcing a 2010 state law that requires drivers to come to a complete stop at crosswalks and wait for pedestrians to fully cross the road. The borough started performing decoy operations in 2013 to catch drivers who failed to yield to officers dressed in plainclothes and, on one occasion, as Donald Duck. Police issued 20 tickets in the most recent decoy effort earlier this month.

Combating pedestrian deaths requires a combination of enforcement, education and engineering, Sinclair said. Engineering in particular is known to make a substantial difference in pedestrian safety, he said.

"We know for a fact that the design of a road affects how people use it," Sinclair said. "If a road is designed for speed, people speed. If a road is designed with visual cues to slow down, people are more likely to drive carefully."

Jersey City is a prime example of re-engineering done right, he said. The city adopted a Vision Zero street safety initiative this year that aims to slash the number of traffic deaths involving pedestrians, bicyclists and people in vehicles to zero by 2026.

"We wanted to be the leader in the state of New Jersey on this front, because we think it's important," Mayor Steven Fulop said.

The city has used paint, planters and bollards to eliminate parking and blind spots at several intersections and implemented a road diet at Communipaw and West Side avenues. Its long-

number of crossing guards and changing the timing of traffic lights to better accommodate walking.

Vision Zero is still in the early stages, but Fulop said it is off to a positive start. Data provided by the mayor's office showed a slight decrease in crashes and fatalities this year, with eight crashes causing life-threatening injuries and four causing deaths, compared with nine serious crashes and five fatal crashes at this time last year.

"There's no question that fatal crashes and even accidents are headed in the right direction, which is downward," Fulop said. "We're certainly not at our goal yet, but you can visibly see the changes in the streetscape from the steps that we've taken already."

Fulop said towns throughout New Jersey will need to embrace a similar strategy as the state's population continues to grow.

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