

Guest opinion: Pedestrians, cyclists are vulnerable on the road

By Darla Letourneau and Dan Moser

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The push to combat distracted driving is crucially important to anyone who shares the road with a driver who is texting, talking on the cell phone, checking e-mails, and so much more.

But it's especially important to pedestrians, bicyclists and motorcyclists. Why? Because they are the most vulnerable road users.

If a distracted driver rear-ends your car at a traffic light or swerves in your lane as you're driving toward them, the results can be disastrous.

But if you're riding your bike in a bike lane, walking by the side of the road or entering a crosswalk when a distracted driver careens your way, the results can be deadly.

Not only do walkers, runners, and cyclists lack the "two tons of metal" protection other drivers may have between them and a distracted driver, but the slightest distraction can send that moving vehicle hurtling into a biker or pedestrian in an instant -and even a glancing blow can be fatal.

Imagine the combined dangers: Even drivers who are paying full attention sometimes fail to see nearby bikers or pedestrians, so imagine the additional risk that comes from someone who is not focusing fully on what's happening around them.

Added to that is the danger presented in a community, such as Southwest Florida, where the infrastructure for bikers and pedestrians is woefully inadequate.

In a county where pedestrians and bicyclists are already at greater risk than the state and national norm, we need to look for ways to make our streets safer - especially for children, senior citizens, and those with mobility limitations - and cracking down on distracted driving is a great place to start.

Of course, laws aren't the only answer, but they are an important first step. Study after study show how dangerous distracted driving is - and when other communities have passed rules to address distracted driving, they've seen accident rates go down and streets become safer - for everyone.

That is why bicycle, pedestrian, and motorcycle advocates, along with AARP and a diverse coalition of groups throughout Florida (including BikeWalkLee), pressed state leaders last year

to ban texting while driving. Unfortunately, no action was taken. These groups will continue to press our leaders for action.

The epidemic of distracted driving is only going to worsen as the next generation, with higher rates of texting and talking on the cell phone while driving, moves into its driving years, not to mention new technologies that will come along offering more distractions.

For vulnerable road users, it's alarming to think that this problem could grow exponentially in the near future if we don't take action now to change driver attitudes and behavior.

So, drivers, hang up and just drive. You - and the pedestrians, cyclists and other drivers who share the road - will all be safer for it.

— **Darla Letourneau and Dan Moser are members of the Steering Group of BikeWalkLee, a community coalition raising public awareness and advocating for complete streets in Lee County - streets that are designed, built, operated and maintained for safe and convenient travel for all users: pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and transit riders of all ages and abilities. For more information, visit BikeWalkLee.org.**

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