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Florida ranked most dangerous state for pedestrians

Pedestrians disproportionately injured and killed due to poor street design and lack of funding; BikeWalkLee urges Congress to support increased focus on pedestrian (and bicyclist) safety

Fort Myers, FL — Florida is the most dangerous state in the nation for pedestrians, a new report released by Transportation for America shows. During the ten years from 2000 to 2009, 5,163 Floridians were killed while walking – a total that's almost 11% of all those killed nationwide while walking during the same period.

Dangerous by Design 2011: Solving the Epidemic of Preventable Pedestrian Deaths (and Making Great Neighborhoods), ranks America's major metropolitan areas and states according to a Pedestrian Danger Index that measures the relative risk to pedestrians. It determined that the top four deadliest major metropolitan areas in the country for pedestrians are in Florida—Orlando, Tampa, Jacksonville, and Miami.

Lee County's pedestrian fatality rate was more than twice the national average for the years 2000-2009. The Lee County pedestrian fatality rate was 3.4 pedestrian fatalities per 100,000 people, compared with 1.6 nationwide and 3.0 for Florida overall. In Lee County there were 178 pedestrian deaths during the last decade, comprising 17% of all traffic fatalities (same as the state average) -- which was 42% above the national average. The annual study was prepared and released by Transportation for America, a national coalition working for transportation reform.

"Lee County's pedestrians are at increased risk because not enough resources are invested to protect all the users of our road system," said Darla Letourneau with BikeWalkLee, a local coalition working to encourage complete streets in Lee County. "With 22% of all traffic deaths in Florida being pedestrians or bicyclists (17% pedestrians and 5% bicyclists), it is unacceptable that Florida only spends 1.5% of its federal transportation dollars to improve the safety of walking and bicycling."

One of the biggest contributors to this crisis is street design. An overwhelming proportion of pedestrian fatalities occur on roads designed for speeding traffic with little concern for pedestrians, lacking safe

sidewalks, crosswalks, and signals. Sadly, it is the elderly, children and minorities -- those most likely to be pedestrians for a variety of reason -- who are killed and injured in disproportionate numbers, due to this failure to build roads with everyone's safety in mind.

Pedestrian safety is often perceived as a strictly local issue, but for decades federal dollars have been invested in thousands of miles of state and local highways. Two-thirds of the more than 47,000 pedestrian fatalities nationally from 2000-2009 occurred on these federal-aid roadways — roads eligible to receive federal funding for construction and improvements with federal guidelines or oversight for design. Yet Congress is contemplating eliminating the two main programs for improving conditions and safety for walking and biking -- programs which have enabled communities around the country to fund much-needed pedestrian infrastructure improvements.

Over the past decade, Lee County has received millions in funding from the federal Transportation Enhancement (TE) and Safe Routes to Schools (SRTS) programs, which have supported sidewalk and bike path projects throughout the county that have made it safer for pedestrians, as well as cyclists. Two examples of these successes:

- Until the mid-2000s there were no sidewalks on the segment of Michigan Avenue between Palmetto Blvd. (now Shoemaker Blvd.) and Seaboard Avenue. This is a congested two-lane road with many single- and multi-family residences nearby, as well as schools, business, and a very busy Lee County Health Dept. A TE grant funded construction of those sidewalks, allowing residents of this moderately low-income neighborhood (many without access to cars) to get around safely without a motor vehicle.
- Lee County's Injury Prevention Coalition took on as a project an elementary school in east Fort Myers, and decided that raising awareness to increase the use of seat belts, child car seats, and bike helmets was necessary, as were improvements to public infrastructure. Local planners and engineers assessed the physical need, and confirmed that sidewalks, flashing school signals, and general roadway improvements were required to make the neighborhood safe for pedestrians and cyclists. A key funding source for one of the sidewalk projects was the SRTS program. Now, conditions are significantly better all around the school, a neighborhood that has many more walkers and bicyclists than in many parts of Lee County.

“Clearly, these two projects, as well as the many others funded by these federal programs, have made Lee County a safer place for pedestrians of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds,” said Letourneau. “We feel lucky in Lee County to have elected officials who have demonstrated their commitment to complete streets and improvements in pedestrian and bicycle facilities, with a goal of making our network safe, accessible, and connected,” Letourneau said.

Just last week, the Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) adopted its first ever comprehensive countywide bicycle pedestrian master plan, and sees funding from these two federal programs as vital to the county's ability to implement its master plan. As part of its action, the MPO board passed a resolution in support of continuation of the current federal bicycle and pedestrian programs in the upcoming federal transportation reauthorization. As Commissioner Ray Judah stated on May 20, “It makes no sense to shift federal funding away from pedestrian and bicycle facilities when Florida is No. 1 in the nation for pedestrian and bicyclist fatality rates. Federal funding for these important programs should be increased, not decreased.” “

Minorities and vulnerable populations, including senior citizens, tend to be disproportionately represented in pedestrian fatalities. The pedestrian fatality rate for senior citizens is 3.7, compared with a fatality rate of 2.7 for Floridians under the age of 65. Florida ranks 7th in the nation for its fatality rate among pedestrians older than 65. Additionally, in Florida from 2000 to 2007 Hispanics suffered an average pedestrian death rate 37% percent higher than the rate for non-Hispanic whites. Similarly, the average pedestrian death rate for African-Americans was 48% percent higher than for non-Hispanic whites.

“With the highest pedestrian-danger index in America and the four deadliest major metropolitan areas for pedestrians in the entire United States, older Floridians have good reason to be concerned about the safety of Florida streets and highways,” said AARP Florida Interim State Director Jeff Johnson. “More than 5,100 Florida pedestrians died in traffic accidents between 2000 and 2009; clearly it’s time for Florida’s leaders to address pedestrian safety.”

Johnson noted that pedestrian safety is particularly important for older Floridians who have chosen to hang up the keys and no longer drive because of health concerns or increasing frailty: “Nationwide, older Americans are nearly twice as likely to be killed as those under 65 years of age.”

While walking conditions remain perilous across the country, many communities are working to make their streets safe and welcoming for people on foot or bicycle, the report shows. In recent years, scores of communities have begun to retrofit poorly designed roads to become “complete streets,” adding sidewalks and bicycle lanes, reducing crossing distances and installing crosswalks to make walking and biking safer and more inviting for all users.

While much remains to be done, elected officials in Lee County are strongly committed to complete streets, and county government is leading the way in creating institutional change that will ensure that the needs of all users are taken into account in planning and designing roadways. As a result, Lee County has been recognized at the national and state level for its leadership and accomplishments in making Lee County a more bicycle-pedestrian-friendly community. “We’re proud of what Lee County has accomplished,” said Letourneau, “and it is important that federal transportation legislation continues to provide our local elected officials with the tools and support they need to implement complete streets and make our streets safer for pedestrians and cyclists.”

Given the rising cost of gas, more and more people are getting out of their cars and seeking alternative forms of transportation. As demand increases, so too does the need to make sure that there are safe and convenient pedestrian routes for everyone. “Congress must stop punting on a long-term transportation bill and prioritize the safety of all road users and give states the resources they need to stem the tide of preventable pedestrian deaths,” said James Corless, director of Transportation for America.

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ABOUT BIKEWALKLEE:

BikeWalkLee is 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 www.BikeWalkLee.org, the BikeWalkLee blog at <http://bikewalklee.blogspot.com/>, or find us on Facebook and Twitter.

ABOUT TRANSPORTATION FOR AMERICA

Transportation for America (T4 America) is the largest, most diverse coalition working on transportation reform today. Our nation's transportation network is based on a policy that has not been significantly updated since the 1950s. They believe it is time for a bold new vision — transportation that guarantees our freedom to move however we choose and leads to a stronger economy, greater energy security, cleaner environment and healthier America for all of us -- with a more responsible investment of our federal tax dollars to create a safer, cleaner, smarter transportation system that works for everyone. Online at www.t4america.org