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June 5, 2011

Guest opinion: Formula helps make pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly communities

Darla Letourneau and Dan Moser

Transportation for America just updated its national pedestrian safety report "Dangerous by Design"; again, Florida is ranked the most dangerous state in the nation for pedestrians and cyclists.

Lee County's pedestrian fatalities are more than double the national average. In Florida and Lee County, 22 percent of all traffic fatalities are pedestrians (17 percent) and bicyclists (5 percent).

In the first five months of 2011 five Lee County cyclists have died on the roads, exceeding the total for 2010.

Why is Florida so much deadlier? As the report suggests, Florida's roads were designed to speed traffic with little concern for walkers or cyclists, senior citizens or children.

Given these troubling statistics, over the past two years county officials have made several significant policy shifts. The Metropolitan Planning Organization and county commissioners have adopted complimentary resolutions, which are driving the effort to ensure that our roads are built with everyone's safety in mind.

Last month, our elected officials at the Metropolitan Planning Organization took another major step forward, with the adoption of the county's first comprehensive countywide plan for bicycling and pedestrian facilities - a blueprint to transform the county into a more bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly community.

Why is this plan important for Lee County?

1. **Safety:** People tend to ride and walk where they feel safe. Safe accommodations encourage more walking and biking.
2. **Sustainability:** Creating transportation routes that don't rely solely on cars will make Lee County more livable and more attractive.
3. **Connectivity:** Connections between jurisdictions and to other modes of transportation is effective and efficient; a connected network works better and maximizes the public investment across political jurisdictions.
4. **Economy and eco-tourism:** Making it easier to bike and walk is good for business and tourism. It helps workers get to jobs and visitors get to attractions, and will improve economic development that benefits everyone. Lee County's "Bikeways" will become as well known as its "Blueways," attracting

more visitors here to pedal and paddle in our beautiful outdoors.

5. Health: Riding a bicycle is good for people's waistlines and their wallets; it's better to burn calories than gas.

Now that we have a plan adopted, implementation will be the key to making it a reality. That will require support from our community as well as national and state leaders.

What does Lee County need from its leaders?

At the state level: Florida needs to catch-up with the rest of the country. A first step would be for officials to make pedestrian and bicycle safety and accommodations a top priority. Florida's goal should be to reduce its share of all traffic fatalities to at or below the national average. Florida must do whatever it takes to lose the notoriety of being the most dangerous state for walkers and cyclists. If 22 percent of the traffic fatalities are pedestrians and cyclists, so 22 percent of transportation safety dollars should be dedicated to these users.

At the federal level: We need Congress to continue dedicated funding for pedestrian and bicycle safety and infrastructure programs and to adopt a national complete streets policy in the upcoming transportation reauthorization legislation.

At the local level: Lee County's organizations and citizens should take responsibility for implementation of the master plan.

BikeWalkLee's efforts over the past two years prove that citizens can make a difference in their community.

Implementation will require support throughout our public agencies, municipalities, businesses and neighborhoods; it will take leadership from our health, tourism, law enforcement, educational institutions, and community stakeholders.

If we leverage our collective energy, engage our creativity and make the commitment necessary, we can make complete streets in Lee County a reality.

Still, infrastructure alone is not sufficient. We also need to change our behavior - accept responsibility, slow down, and remain alert when we're on the road.

We need to be more cautious and courteous of those around us.

While much remains to be done, we have elected officials, government agencies, and grass-roots organizations who are strongly committed to complete streets and are leading the county in a new direction.

There is no better time to work together in making Lee County a more safe and livable community.

Darla Letourneau and Dan Moser serve on the steering committee for BikeWalkLee, a community coalition 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. See more online at BikeWalkLee.org.