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Editorial: Non-motorists face grave risk

Florida is the most dangerous state for cyclists, pedestrians

May 7 proved to be a tragic day for two women who rode their bicycles in different parts of Lee County.

Tracy A. Kleinpell, 46, was riding with her husband on Sanibel Island. Kelly Geiger, 52, was riding in Bonita Springs. Both were hit by drivers and died as a result.

Neither motorist, Rachel Ryan, 22, nor Theresa Shirley, 46, has been charged in the deaths.

Our community grieves for the victims' families, and the other cyclists and pedestrians who have been injured or killed on Southwest Florida roads.

What we know is that our roads are dangerous - in fact a national report recently released found that Florida's roads are the most dangerous in the country for non-motorists.

The safety advocacy coalition Transportation for America released its "Dangerous by Design 2011" report late last month.

The report states that in the last decade 178 pedestrians were killed in the Fort Myers-Cape Coral metro area, making it the fifth most dangerous area in Florida. With 3.4 pedestrian deaths per 100,000 people, Lee County had nearly twice the national average of 1.8.

The Naples-Marco Island area, in contrast, had 52 pedestrian deaths last decade, and was the least dangerous of 20 metro areas in Florida. Collier's deaths per 100,000 matched the nation's at 1.8.

Fortunately, local efforts to make our roads safer and more amenable to non-motorists are moving along.

Since the deaths of Kleinpell and Geiger there have been "rides of remembrance" and a debate about whether cyclists should be on the same roads as motorists. The Letters to the Editor section March 23 had a handful of letters from readers insisting that cyclists were unwise to ride on the streets.

But the answer is not to segregate cyclists from the roads. Today, numerous members of the community have responded with their support for safer roads.

On May 20 the Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization unanimously adopted a countywide

cyclist and pedestrian master plan. This culminated from a two-year effort to introduce "complete streets," or roads with well-marked bike lanes, sidewalks and other essentials for non-motorists.

A few streets meet this designation; most do not.

Community efforts by groups such as BikeWalkLee and leadership by the county commissioners and administration led to this victory. The Naples Pathway Coalition has been an effective advocate in Collier.

However, the auto is still the vehicle of choice in this community, partly due to tradition, a limited public transportation infrastructure and sprawl. More people, however, are choosing to walk, bike and run, either by choice or by necessity.

But Florida beat out every other state and the District of Columbia for the highest Pedestrian Danger Index, according to the Dangerous by Design report. Among the report's findings:

- 47,741 pedestrians died in traffic-related incidents over the last decade - or 11.6 percent of all fatalities. In addition, 688,000 pedestrians were injured.
- Florida had 5,163 pedestrian fatalities in that same period, or 16.6 percent of its total.
- Four of Florida's metropolitan areas top the list of the nation's most dangerous regions: Orlando-Kissimmee (No. 1), Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater (No. 2), Jacksonville (No. 3) and Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Pompano Beach (No. 4).

The recommendations made by the report are:

- To retain federal funding for bike/walk initiatives
- To commit to a national "complete streets" plan
- To fill gaps where some streets are bike/ped friendly and others are not. (Efforts in Lee County include building bike lanes for \$500,000 in gas tax revenues along Hickory Boulevard in Bonita Springs, to be completed this month).
- To ensure that government agencies commit their fair share to bike/ped efforts
- To hold states accountable for failing to enact necessary fixes

These are good recommendations. We must press our local, state and federal leaders to take action.

One of Florida's most powerful assets is its tourism and retirement economy, and having opportunities for people to enjoy the outdoors in a way other than driving is a plus.

Cyclists and pedestrians, too, need to be mindful of the laws of the road, making sure to travel on the correct side of the road, wear bright colors and use lights at night, not put on headphones while riding, and riding or walking defensively.

Regardless of any laws that should be passed, a distracted driver will be in a position to harm or kill others on the road. It's our responsibility as citizens to drive, ride and walk safely.

Additional facts

Bike safety tips

WEAR YOUR HELMET

Before you get on your bike, put on a helmet. It is the best thing you can do to be safe. Bikes offer no protection in case of a crash, so you need to wear your protection. Wearing your helmet may save your life if you are hit by or run into a large truck or bus. Remember, riding into a truck is equivalent to hitting a steel wall. Your helmet is your life.

BIKERS BEWARE

Always be aware of the traffic around you. This is especially important when riding in traffic with large trucks and buses. Trucks and buses make wide right turns. Never sneak in between a truck or bus and the curb or you could get crushed. Never assume that all drivers see your hand signals or will yield for you. Assume you are invisible to other road users and ride defensively.

CHECK YOUR BRAKES

Always check your brakes so that you are prepared to stop. Also remember that a truck requires more space to stop than you do on your bike. Never assume that a truck will be able to stop quickly if you get in the way. You may have to get out of the way to save your own life.

RIDE WITH TRAFFIC

Avoiding a crash is the safest way to ride. Ride on the right side, with the flow of traffic. Riding against traffic may cause you to miss traffic control devices, such as traffic signs and stop lights. Be especially careful when riding near or around trucks and buses. Use caution and pay attention to trucks. Watch for their signals because the driver may not see you or be able to stop soon enough in an emergency situation. However, you should be prepared in case the truck's signals don't work or the driver doesn't use them. That is why you, as the bicyclist, need to watch out for yourself. For a bike rider, the safest bet is to always be aware of the traffic around you.

BEWARE OF THE NO-ZONE

Beware of riding too closely to a large truck. Large trucks have blind spots in the front, back and on the sides, which make it difficult for the driver to see around them. If you ride in these blind spots, truck drivers cannot see you and your chance for a crash are greatly increased.

- sharetheroadsafely.org
