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Guest opinion: Sens. Nelson, Rubio agree: All Floridians deserve safe roads



[News-Press](#)

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by Darla Letourneau of BikeWalkLee

Amidst the partisan rancor in Washington, there was a ray of bipartisan hope that deserves to be highlighted. On Dec. 14, the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation passed its section of the federal transportation bill and included a measure to make our streets safer for all users.

This provision was adopted unanimously with the support of Florida's two senators — Democrat Bill Nelson and Republican Mario Rubio — both of whom sit on this committee.

This action is especially important for Florida because our state is the most dangerous state in the nation when it comes to pedestrian and bicyclist fatalities.

Over the last decade, 5,163 pedestrians and bicyclists were killed in Florida. According to the National Safety Council, each traffic death has a comprehensive cost of \$4.3 million, which means these Florida fatalities have cost a total of \$22.2 billion.

Two-thirds of these fatalities occurred on roads built or maintained with federal aid. This provision, if included in the final transportation bill, will ensure highways built with federal funds accommodate all users, by establishing a national policy to address safety for all users — a policy that will help save lives and money.

This federal safe streets policy will mean that federally funded road projects in Florida must meet federal standards to safely accommodate all road users.

A new Florida state policy implementing these standards would complement the efforts currently under way in 16 communities in Florida (including Lee County) to develop and implement complete streets policies.

These local policies ensure that agencies routinely design and operate our transportation system to enable safe access for drivers, transit users and vehicles, pedestrians and bicyclists, as well as for older people, children and people with disabilities. We know that streets that are designed, built, operated and maintained for safe and convenient travel for all users are safer for everyone.

BikeWalkLee is proud of Lee County elected officials — acting through the Lee Metropolitan Planning Organization, the Lee Board of County Commissioners and the Fort Myers City

Council — for the strong support they have shown for complete streets and a more balanced multi-modal transportation system. Lee County's efforts to make our roads safer for all users, using a complete streets approach, have underscored the value of this approach and the need for a federal policy. Our local governments are working to make our streets safer, but they only control the local roads, not the state roads. A federal policy that applies to federally-funded roads would help close the gap.

Having a federal policy that complements the local complete streets policies would further the ability of state and local governments to enact programs designed to spend transportation funds more wisely by increasing transportation choices for all of our citizens, improving public health, and developing new economic opportunities.

The congressional process of developing and enacting a new transportation bill is in the early stages, so there are many more steps to go before this provision becomes law. However, we are heartened by the Senate Commerce Committee's bipartisan support for making our streets safer for all users.

We applaud Florida's two U.S. senators for reaching across the aisle in support of a measure that will benefit all Floridians. Working in a bipartisan way to reverse Florida's ranking as the most dangerous state in the country for both pedestrians and cyclists is a hopeful sign.

We encourage all Florida's members of Congress to build on this initial and important success and come together to enact innovative and long overdue transportation legislation for the 21st century.

- Darla Letourneau serves on the steering committee for BikeWalkLee, a community coalition advocating for complete streets in Lee County — streets 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.