

Deadly Streets

Would delayed bike projects have saved a life?

Would a woman cycling home last week have lived if the city had completed long-delayed safety improvements?

Eugene police reported that a car struck and killed Mingo Pelkey, age 39, on River Road at 7 pm, Aug. 29. Bystanders told police Pelkey had her hand up to signal and was wearing a helmet when she changed lanes near Hunsaker and was struck from behind by a Volkswagen Passat, according to a press release.

The Eugene police are still investigating the crash and have not said whether the driver, James Gleich, will be cited or prosecuted.

A city project to build an underpass around Beltline connecting to the riverfront bike path would have allowed Pelkey to avoid dangerous River Road to get home from work, but the safety project has been delayed for years.

A decade ago the regional TransPlan responded to years of calls for a safer bike route under Beltline by including a project connecting the riverfront path under the freeway. A related project included a new bike lane on Beaver and Hunsaker streets that would have provided a low- or no-traffic safe route to Pelkey's home near Irving and River Road.

But city and county officials have given safety funding for people riding bikes a lower priority than projects to increase car speed. Only 2.2 percent of the funding for metro transportation improvements goes to bike projects, although 11 percent of the population cycles to work in Eugene.

The Beltline underpass connector was also delayed and doubled in cost to \$2.2 million to mitigate unsafe driveways for a gravel pit company. The city expects to finally complete that long-awaited safety improvement this fall.

But the Hunsaker/Beaver bike lane listed as a "priority" project a decade ago appears to remain delayed indefinitely. Activists at WeBikeEugene.org complained last year that funding for the bike safety feature was pulled mysteriously at a Metropolitan Policy Committee meeting at the last minute.

As it stands now, a study by a city consultant for the city's new pedestrian and bicycle plan identified River Road as one of the most dangerous streets in the city for cyclists with 18 collisions involving people on bikes over the past five years.

River Road has bike lanes but the area appears poorly planned with car-dominated strip development served by a multitude of driveways and hazardous, high-speed traffic.

A draft of the city's new bike/ped plan identifies intersections in need of safety improvements but does not include Irving and River Road near where Pelkey died.

The plan does include the Beaver/Hunsaker bike lane and riverfront trail connector path to bypass the busy highway which is now the only nearby way to get past Beltline, a freeway that walls off much of north Eugene.

The bike/ped plan also proposes a bike boulevard on low traffic Park Street to the west connecting to a new Beltline bike/

ped underpass or overpass to serve the neighborhood.

Eugene and other cities have used brightly painted bike boxes to more safely allow cyclists to change lanes for turns at intersections. Cars stop behind the box at a red light, and bikes move to the other side. The city has had a bike box on High Street near City Hall for years and the city just installed a new bike box painted bright green at Alder and 11th.

Although prioritizing bike safety improvements could save lives, data and studies do not show that biking is more deadly than driving. In Oregon, bikes made up 2.3 percent of commuters and 2.2 percent of fatal accidents last year, according to state and census data.

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Other studies have demonstrated that when heart attacks and other health risks of obesity are factored in, biking is actually far safer than driving. An exhaustive, scientific Dutch study last year factored accident risk, inhaled pollution and exercise into fatality rates and found that the average longevity benefits of cycling for individuals were about nine times greater than the accident risks. Earlier Danish and Australian studies found similar results.

The study did not factor in the societal benefits of reduced air and greenhouse gas pollution of more people bicycling. Danish studies have also shown that as cycling increases, overall accident rates decline due to a "safety in numbers" effect as cars become less dominant and more careful.

Even after Pelkey's death, some motorists reacted with violent words to the idea that they should carefully share the road with people on bikes. One comment on KVAL.com compared bicycle riders to people who intentionally walk in front of firing squads. Another comment compared riding a bike on the city's streets to sticking a hand in a wood chipper.

But Pelkey's death could still help bring safety improvements to save lives. After a child died crossing Bailey Hill, a hazardous road for decades, the city finally completed a new crosswalk last year, three years too late. **EW**

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