

PEDESTRIANS

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Dan Moser, the bicycle/pedestrian program coordinator at the Lee County Health Department, examined crash data from a U.S. Department of Transportation report and found the "danger index" for pedestrians was higher in Fort Myers/Cape Coral than any other area in America except Ocala and Sumter, S.C.

"That was a startling statistic for us," Moser said.

So, where are the worst spots for children and adults?

"We used EMS data and it showed that the Palm Beach Boulevard area and parts of Cape Coral were the worst," King said. "But it wasn't just one spot, it was scattered around those areas."

And why are pedestrians so at-risk here?

The problems

Cape Coral, a huge pre-platted community, still has significant areas without sidewalks. That forces children walking to school or to a bus stop into the roadway.

On Palm Beach Boulevard, crosswalks with striping and a signal are more than a half-mile apart along the strip of highway running from downtown to Interstate 75. So people just dart across traffic anywhere along the road — after all, who wants to hike a mile out of their way to cross the street?

Then there are the confusing laws for motorists and pedestrians that make it difficult to understand who has the right-of-way in a crossing situation. Motorists are required to stop for anyone in a crosswalk. That's defined in Florida law as anywhere streets intersect whether there are stripes there or not.

Couple that with little enforcement of pedestrian traffic laws and a culture in which motorists ignore and endanger pedestrians and you'll find the all-too-often deadly encounter of humans and machines.

Motorists view pedestrians and bicycle riders simply as obstacles that slow down the flow of traffic, Moser said. "You don't get much assistance from drivers when you're in a crosswalk."

Yet, he added, misbehavior by bike riders or pedestrians adds to the carnage.

Last week, on Palm Beach Boulevard, Florida Weekly observed a bicyclist riding into oncoming traffic in an unoccupied lane trying to cross the busy highway.

The solutions

As risky as it is walking to school in Lee, officials from local hospitals, the health department, county government and area schools are working to find an answer.

A new safety program called "Walk-Safe," an elementary school-based pedestrian-injury-prevention program is coming to the 10 elementary schools in Lee County — Caloosa, Hancock Creek, Skyline, Allen Park, J. Colin English, Franklin Park, Edgewood, Edison Park, Tanglewood and Orangewood — that are most susceptible to child-pedestrian injury.

And this is not just a 'pass out some stickers' program, said Gillian Hotz, co-director of the Pediatric Neurotrauma Program at the University of Miami/Jackson Memorial Medical Center.

"We've got to have programs that work," she said. "We're going into the schools and teaching safety."

University of Miami staffers will be in Lee County next month to train teachers to conduct the three-day seminar for school children at the 10 selected schools. Student there will receive classroom education, videos, outside simulations and participate in a poster contest — all aimed at pedestrian safety.

Holtz, who specializes in pediatric rehabilitation, started the program in 2002 after noticing "a lot of kids being hit by cars."

"She did some research and found that the kids were getting hit on the way to school," said Sherika Colston, a program assistant in the WalkSafe and Neurotrauma Research Office at the University of Miami. "We noticed that a lot of kids were being injured in areas that were not safe for pedestrians."

Hotz said the key to reducing pedestrian crashes involving children is a coordinated effort by the local hospital's trauma center, school district and government.

"School boards that are behind pedestrian safety buy into this program right away," she said. "And Lee County's bought in."

The program has worked, especially in Miami-Dade, Hotz said.

It's improved the pedestrian safety knowledge of elementary school children and improved crossing behaviors, Hotz said.

Lee Memorial's King said the Lee County Injury Prevention Coalition is working with other agencies to make the roads safer.

"The intent is to not only teach kids the proper behavior but to address all the issues around the schools such as speeding drivers, crosswalks, sidewalks and crossing guards," she said.

The Lee County Sheriff's Office will put school zones under surveillance while Lee DOT works on sidewalks and crosswalks, King said.

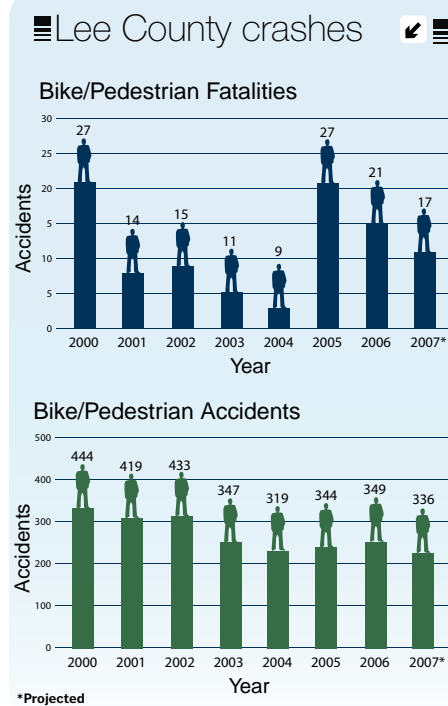
And Moser keeps up the pressure for more bikepaths, better sidewalks and more education.

"We need to improve the environment for pedestrians and cyclists," he said. ■

If you go

WalkSafe

>>What: A three-day program teaching pedestrian safety
>>Where: Ten Lee County elementary schools
>>When: Oct. 3, 4 and 5
>>Info: www.walksafe.us



Pedestrian and bicycle rules

>>BICYCLE REGULATIONS

In Florida a bicycle is legally defined as a vehicle. Bicyclists have the same rights to the roadway, and must obey the same traffic laws as the operators of other vehicles.

When riding on sidewalks or in crosswalks, a bicyclist has the same rights and duties as a pedestrian.

A bicyclist riding on sidewalks or in crosswalks must yield the right of way to pedestrians and must give an audible signal before passing.

A bicycle operated between sunset and sunrise must be equipped with a lamp on the front exhibiting a white light visible from 500 feet to the front and a red reflector and a lamp on the rear exhibiting a red light visible from 600 feet to the rear.

A bicyclist who is not traveling at the same speed of other traffic must ride as close as practical to the right hand curb or edge of roadway. A bicyclist may leave the right-most portion of the road in one of the following situations: when passing, making a left turn, to avoid hazards, or when a lane is too narrow for a bicycle and a car to share it safely.

*Riding single file is required except on bike paths or parts of roadways set aside for the exclusive use of bicycles, or when two people riding side-by-side within one lane will not impede traffic flow.

SOURCE: Section 316.2065, Florida Statutes

>>PEDESTRIAN REGULATIONS

When a sidewalk is available, pedestrians are not allowed to walk on the roadway.

Where sidewalks are not provided, pedestrians shall walk on the shoulder on the left side of the roadway, facing traffic.

When traffic signals are not present or not operational, the driver of a vehicle must yield the right of way, slowing or stopping if necessary, to pedestrians crossing within a crosswalk.

Pedestrians crossing the roadway at any point other than within a marked or unmarked crosswalk must yield the right of way to the vehicles upon the roadway.

Pavement markings are not required for crosswalks at intersections. Imaginary lines connecting the sidewalks on opposite sides of an intersection define an unmarked crosswalk. Pedestrians in unmarked crosswalks have all the rights of pedestrians in marked crosswalks.

No pedestrian shall walk upon a limited access facility (freeway or interstate highway) or a ramp connecting a limited access facility to any other street or highway.

SOURCE: Sections 316.130 and 316.091, Florida Statutes

SHELTER

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permitting process right now. The builders are saying the men will be there at night and on the weekends. It will be like an old-fashioned barn-raising."

She said donations of cash and supplies have provided 78 percent of the estimated \$400,000 needed to construct the duplex.

"We also need a few more bunk beds and single beds," Hurt said.

In an effort to raise the remainder of the money, Mary's House of Hope is holding a breakfast at High Point condos

in downtown Fort Myers from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. on Sept. 15. The cost is \$25 per person. Reservations can be made by calling (239) 878-3702.

The charitable organization is also building a dream home in Cape Coral that will be auctioned off. Tickets for that cost \$100.

more information

>>For more information, go online to www.maryshouseofhope.org. Donations can be also mailed to: Mary's House of Hope, 1104 S.E. 12th Ave., Cape Coral, FL 33990

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