

Street Smarts: It takes a community to improve cycling safety along Mission Street

by Ramona Turner

T.C. of Santa Cruz e-mailed Street Smarts recently wanting to know the latest news about various pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly projects around town.

Last Tuesday's blog, at www.santacruzlive.com/blogs/streetsmarts, delved into the Broadway-Brommer path.

Today's column and my blog will explore the bike-pedestrian safety improvements being made along Mission Street.

The most noticeable changes are the four "Bike in Lane" signs along the north and southbound stretch that connects downtown to the Westside and beyond.

They were installed Oct. 20, 2008, in response to two horrific fatal vehicle-versus-bicycle accidents earlier in the year. The city approved their installation last May.

The yellow signs depict a cyclist riding in a travel lane in front of a car, with words below saying "Bike in Lane."

"After the second fatality on Mission Street," said Cheryl Schmitt, the city's bicycle-pedestrian coordinator, "Mayor Ryan Coonerty and Assemblyman John Laird convened a community consortium to strategize solutions. One of the things that came up was the signage on Mission Street."

The purpose of the signs, she said, was to help motorists understand that cyclists may be in the lane.

"The sign 'Share the Road' doesn't tell users what to expect," she said. "This sign makes it clearer that bikes may be further in the middle of the lane, not just on the far right."

The Mission Street Safety Task Force was a joint effort between the city, Caltrans, Laird's office, local law enforcement and the cycling community, Schmitt said.

The signs are experimental and are only being used in Santa Cruz, according to Caltrans officials. The signs will stay in place for a year before being reviewed for their effectiveness. If vehicle-versus-cyclist collision statistics support the conclusion that the signs work, they could stay. If not, out they go.

But sign installation isn't the only thing being done to educate Mission Street users how better to share the road.

Piet Canin and his employer, Ecology Action, have been teaching cyclists and truck drivers how to coexist alongside each other on the tight and congested corridor.

"Our main focus became educating both truck drivers and cyclists, especially cyclists, to share the road safely," he said.

Ecology Action made brochures that explain both the cyclist and truck driver point of view -- from blind spots to maneuvering limitations -- involved in trying to get from point A to point B along Mission Street. Those brochures are available online at www.ecoact.org.

The safety pamphlets were handed out to businesses along Mission Street, as well as to students attending free cycling safety workshops at UC Santa Cruz, Canin said.

The goal now is to continue pumping out the safety message, reach out to more truckers and Spanish-speaking cyclists, as well as make cycling-friendly improvements to side streets in an attempt to create safe alternatives to riding on Mission Street, he said.

Those infrastructure improvements are on the city's to-do list, Schmitt said.

Later this year, the city's Transportation Commission will view a presentation about using a \$172,000 Safe Routes to School Grant to smooth out sidewalks for pedestrian traffic, as well as creating a bicycle-friendly route along King, California and Seaside streets, she said.

"I think the main thing is that everyone is interested in making it safer out there," Schmitt said. "Everyone is looking at the situation and taking steps to make it safer out there."

Street Smarts is written by Ramona Turner and appears Mondays in the print edition. If you have a transportation question or idea, send it to streetsmarts@santacruzsentinel.com.

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