

Moon Township police chief, trail group look to improve bicycling safety

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April 10, 2016 Moon Township, PA — On the morning of Sept. 2, 2014, Moon Township Police Chief Leo McCarthy rode his bicycle on Route 51 for the last time. He was almost a month away from his 60th birthday, heading south through Moon on his carbon fiber road bike. He cruised along the road's shoulder when a woman driving a Kia Soul passed him in one of the two southbound lanes. But when she made a right turn onto Thorn Run Road, her vehicle and his bicycle collided. The crash forced him to the ground, and he knew he broke his left arm.

With McCarthy injured, an ambulance took him to UPMC Mercy in Pittsburgh. The hospital staff also diagnosed him with a concussion and torn rotator cuff, he said. Eventually, doctors put three metal rods in his left arm. McCarthy's crash was just one of about 1,300 incidents across Pennsylvania in 2014, according to a Pennsylvania Crash Facts and Statistics report. Many crashes have rallied people together, but cycling advocates say much more work is needed to make cycling safer.

In January, an Ohio River Trail Council representative contacted McCarthy, noting three cyclists died on Route 51 over 25 months between July 2013 and August 2015. The organization wants to create improved cycling and pedestrian routes.

McCarthy responded with a letter, sharing details of his crash. Years ago, the Moon resident also cycled from his home to Chicago. The most dangerous portion of his trip, he said, was northbound on Route 51 from South Heights to Monaca.

When Center Township resident Ed Quigley rides his bicycle on Route 51, he passes by three memorials where other cyclists have died. "It's always a somber moment," Quigley said. "It's like riding past a tombstone." The memorials each consist of a so called "ghost bike," or bicycle painted white, often decorated with flowers. Quigley said he hopes when drivers pass them, they also remember what happened.

On July 21, 2013, 17-year-old Moon resident Emily Jancart died the morning after a car collided with her bicycle on University Boulevard near the Sewickley Bridge.

On Oct. 31, 2014, 23-year-old Braddock resident Taylor Banks was riding his bicycle from Aliquippa to Rochester when a truck hit and dragged him near the West Aliquippa Bridge, according to police.

On Aug. 6, 2015, 54-year-old Arthur Bell Jr. of Center Township died at UPMC Presbyterian after his bicycle was struck by a car in Hopewell Township near the South Heights border. "I don't think anybody wakes up and says, 'I want to hurt somebody,'" said Quigley, a board member for the trail council. "But today we have issues with distracted driving. And it only takes one."

In the crash that killed Banks, driver William D. Edenfield, 60, was charged with homicide by vehicle, causing an accident involving death, driving under the influence, careless driving, and failing to stop and give information. A trial has been postponed to Aug. 15.

All three cyclists who died on Route 51 were commuting to or from work at the time of the crashes. And that section of Route 51 is still used for a Pennsylvania bicycle route.

Bell's brother, Brian, had gone on bike trips with him in the past, spending about a week in states like Washington, Oregon and California to bike about 30 to 100 miles each day, he said. Bell, a Wexford area resident, now has a 12-year-old son, Parker, and 7-year-old daughter, Selina, also cyclists. But concerns for their safety and the dangers of distracted drivers talking on their phones have made his family rely on trails for biking.

On Route 51, he noticed how overpasses create issues for space with cyclists. Overpasses force traffic into narrower areas, and motorists don't know whether to speed up and pass cyclists or not, he said.

After Bell's death, the Ohio River Trail Council sent a letter to Gov. Tom Wolf and other state officials asking to improve safety from Coraopolis to Monaca by enforcing speed limits and installing road signage, markings and arrows.

A Pedalcycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee to PennDOT also heard details on Jan. 5 on the fatalities, Vincent Troia, the executive chairman, president and chief executive officer of the trail Council, said in an online message to supporters.

PennDOT spokesman Rich Kirkpatrick said committee members did not believe engineering or roadway issues caused those deaths on Route 51. He said the committee is not recommending changes there at this time. There are cases when a state bicycling route could be changed. That could happen where there's a significant safety issue, such as an underpass with no shoulder or spot where cyclists can't ride without being in heavy traffic, Kirkpatrick said.

Still, trail council members believe state funding should be a priority so that the bicycle route can be upgraded and relocated to Woodlawn Road, which largely runs parallel to Route 51. A [petition on change.org](#) asks for support to help convince committee members to prioritize funding and construction for the Ohio River greenway trail.

The group already has paid for engineering studies to develop an alternative route in that area and on other roadways. The council is also seeking grants to help improve the route. But raising money can be challenging, such as when grants need to be matched by a community.

"We're working hard, but it couldn't be fast enough," Troia said. "I would hate for someone else to get hit by a car."

Like the Ohio River Trail Council, Moon's police department goes beyond talking about cycling safety. The department has used federal drug forfeiture money to obtain helmets and bicycles, McCarthy said. Moon police have hundreds of helmets in storage. The department gives those away at community events. McCarthy even has helmets in his office when people, familiar with his outreach, come and ask for them. McCarthy has also obtained helmets thanks to the Allegheny County Health Department, Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, PennDOT and others, he said. A local sporting goods company, which wishes to remain anonymous, has even donated bikes, McCarthy said. Last year, children received bicycles at an Earth Day event at Robin Hill Park and a litter cleanup event at Mooncrest park. At these events, McCarthy fits helmets for children. But sometimes he notices adults could use them, so a whole family can get them.

"We don't ask who you are, where you're from," he said. While McCarthy can talk about issues from the perspective of cyclists, the police chief also knows they can create problems. Some cyclists disregard stop signs and red lights, and others ride on the wrong side of the road, against traffic.

"The most important thing," he said, "is that (cyclists) actually obey the law." This year, McCarthy has told his officers to make traffic stops for cyclists who violate the law, he said. The intention is not to ticket people but to improve safety for everyone, so warnings can be given. "I'm not ordering them to write every cyclist a ticket, especially children," McCarthy said. "(But) if they have a history of doing this, I want real citations issued. Because reckless cyclists are a huge part of the problem."

McCarthy still cycles, but since the crash he's kept a promise with his wife, an emergency room physician, not to ride on roads. "I only ride on trails now. And trails are great. There are so many trails in this area," McCarthy said. "You can ride from the beginning of the Montour Trail in Moon Township all the way to Washington, D.C." "Ninety-nine percent of the time," he said, "you'll be on trails."

Family keeps memory of Taylor Banks alive When Rochester resident Beth Ann Banks has a free Saturday, she visits the site where a hit-and-run driver killed her son on Route 51 in Aliquippa. Braddock resident Taylor Banks was 23 years old on Oct. 31, 2014, when he was cycling north toward Rochester and died in the crash. Police said driver William D. Edenfield, 60, drank three shots of tequila and seven or eight beers before causing the crash. Now the site of the crash has a "ghost bike," or bicycle painted white and decorated, to commemorate Banks. The family frequently goes there with flowers. Banks takes a bus to Ambridge then walks across the Ambridge-Aliquippa Bridge then north on Route 51 to visit the site, she said.

"That's all we have left of my child," she said. On March 24, Banks would have turned 25, so family members along with other supporters, from cyclists to motorcyclists, gathered near the memorial site. They released 25 balloons, Banks said.

Family members have decorated his memorial site with flowers from daisies to poinsettias. Banks' older brother, Jared, and his wife, Nicole Renfro, visit the memorial site from their Braddock home.

Renfro was surprised how the Route 51 area lacks bike lanes and has little to no shoulder. She wants to create a dedicated lane in Banks' memory. The couple has watched as cars zip down the roadway, undetected by police cars that have no room along the roadway to enforce the speed limit. Renfro said her husband will walk from the memorial to the location of the crash and just shake his head. "I don't know what he's thinking," she said. "I can only imagine." __

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