

Comments for 5/18 ROS Ceremony on Central Avenue

I. Thank You

Thank you all for joining us here to remember the many people that have died so needlessly along this long straight stretch of State Route 5 connecting Albany and Schenectady. Today is also the third Wednesday in May when groups all over the world conduct a Ride of Silence to remember cyclists that have been killed and seriously injured in crashes. For those that wish to join us, that ride will directly follow this discussion.

II. What kind of road is this?

Central Avenue is a four lane highway engineered to get motor vehicles quickly through the area while at the same time serving competing interests as a center for business, shopping, lodging and lots of other human activities. There are other area roads like this: Troy - Schenectady Road in Colonie, Hoosick Road in Troy, Western Avenue Guilderland and Loudon Road in Colonie to name a few. They present many of the same kinds of issues:

- Long distances between intersections, encouraging people to cross mid block
- High traffic speeds making fatalities more likely when crashes occur
- Four or five traffic lanes making crossings especially difficult for the disabled and elderly
- Lack of bike lanes or adequate shoulders for cyclists
- Lack of a median or refuge for pedestrians crossing these wide roads
- Interchanges with interstates complete with on and off ramps that are especially treacherous for pedestrians and cyclists to cross

III. Why Changes are Needed

Coupled with these problems for pedestrians and cyclists, the dynamics of all our roads have changed dramatically for the worse.

Vehicles have been getting more massive. The impact of a large SUV striking a cyclist or pedestrian on the same road and at the same speed as a traditional passenger sedan is going to do more damage to that victim. Firstly, the pedestrian is getting impacted by a much larger object. Secondly, the front ends of vehicles have been getting higher. What might once have been an injury to the lower body will more likely be an upper body or head injury. Also victims are more likely to end up under an SUV where they might be run over rather than on the hood.

Another development is that since COVID people are driving faster and with less attention. Even with less vehicles on the road the New York Times reported in 2020 “Crashes killed more than 6,700 pedestrians, up about 5 percent from the year before*.” Based on another commonly used road safety metric — vehicle miles traveled — pedestrian fatality rate [spiked about 21 percent in 2020](#), the largest ever year-over-year increase.

2021 data looks even worse. Today the TU reported NHTSA saw a 10.5% increase in road deaths - the largest ever annual increase since they started tracking traffic fatalities in 1975.

IV What has Been Done to Make Central Safer?

In 2013 after many of the pedestrian deaths you heard about, NYS DOT conducted a Central Avenue Pedestrian Safety Study that was published in 2015. The Report recommended a Three E's approach to the Route 5 Corridor: Education, Enforcement and Engineering.

For Education - there was a See and Be Seen Campaign for Pedestrian and Driver Awareness. Emphasizing drivers "Seeing" vulnerable users & traffic signs & signals and pedestrians "Being Seen" by for example, using the crosswalks.

For Enforcement - police departments were encouraged to warn and ticket drivers and pedestrians.

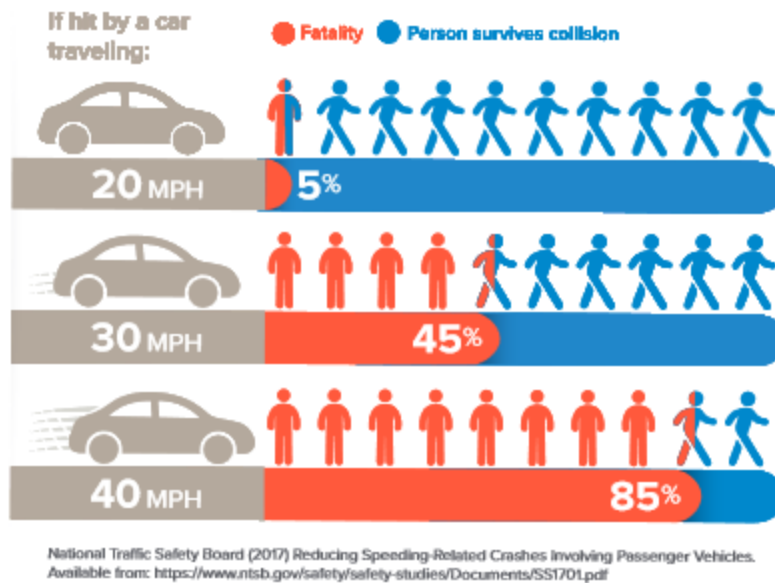
For Engineering, all 75 pedestrian signals were standardized and upgraded. Some midblock bus stops were eliminated. As far as I could tell the speed limit on the road hasn't changed. The extraordinary distance between pedestrian crossings hasn't changed. Certainly no bike lanes were installed.

Since that report, 1 cyclist and 4 additional pedestrians were killed on this roadway with the fate of a 5th that suffered major trauma this year not yet known.

Speed is very important in two ways.

First, the higher the speed, the greater the impact damage in a crash

Second, the higher the speed the more likely a crash will occur.



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A City of Seattle study found *A driver's field of vision increases as speed decreases. At lower speeds, drivers can see more of their surroundings and have more time to see and react to potential hazards - like pedestrians.* Seattle lowered speed limits, increased the density of signage showing the lower speed limits and their data shows up to 39% less crashes.

IV. What Behaviors Do We Accommodate Which Do We Mandate Upon Penalty of Death

In a scenario we see over and over again - the pedestrian is solely blamed for their behavior of not crossing correctly. The speed limit remains unchanged and unquestioned. Traffic engineers typically gear speed limits to the operating speed of a road which is guided by a rule of the 85th percentile - the speed at which 85% of drivers drive at or below. In other words, speed limits are largely guided by the behavior of drivers.***

Even though we know pedestrian behavior on roads like Central Avenue shows they will continue to cross in the middle of these overly long blocks & even though we know crashes at lower speeds will result in less loss of life, the speed limits have not changed. Why are we so much more concerned with accommodating the behavior of drivers over the behavior of more vulnerable people that need to use roads like this?

After the March 20th death of pedestrian Daniel Minehan who was killed on Rt 2 / Troy Schenectady Road in Colonie, the public information officer for Colonie police, said the department has not identified a concerning trend because he said most of the accidents that have taken place in the vicinity over the past few years have been because of pedestrians entering the roadway.

“They’re not very pedestrian-friendly areas,” he said, noting the high number of lanes and speed limit in the area. “But the state has done everything they can do in terms of making it safer for pedestrians.”

V. What things can be done to make roads like this safer?

- 1) Lower the speed limit. Lower speed limits do save lives and are especially needed now that vehicles have grown larger and people are driving with less attention. We must reject slavish adherence to the 85th percentile rule in areas where there are so many vulnerable road users
- 2) Redesign the road to discourage speeding and slow cars down. When you create a four lane highway, people will drive like its a four lane highway
- 3) Add signalized crosswalks in the middle of excessively long blocks
- 4) Enforce speed limits using speed cameras.
- 5) Install refuge median islands
- 6) Install bike lanes.
- 7) Re-engineer the interchanges to our Interstates and other marvels of traffic mis-engineering like Latham Circle to allow for safe passage for pedestrians, cyclists and those using wheelchairs and mobility scooters
- 8) Until such time as we have safe passage through our Interstate Interchanges and Latham Circles we should offer free next stop safe passage on our bus system to get vulnerable people through these abominations
- 9) On the State level - we encourage all of you to push for passage of the Crash Victims Rights and Safety Act -

VI. CVRSA

The Albany Bicycle Coalition is a member of the NYS Safe Streets Coalition that has been pushing for passage of the Crash Victims Rights and Safety Act. This collection of 8 NY State bills that

- permit municipalities like Colonie and Albany to lower the speed on their own roads
- provide complete streets solutions,
- improve driver education,
- require motorists to pass cyclists safely and
- provide legal rights to victims of traffic violence.

Two of these bills were introduced by our local state representatives Patricia Fahy and Phil Steck.

We are very proud that the City of Albany Common Council was the first local government to pass a resolution for these bills to be passed at the state level. It has been followed by the City of Buffalo, Saratoga Springs, Kingston and others.

We encourage everyone here to take home the flyers we distributed. If you follow the link on the flyer you can learn more about these bills and there is an option for you to automatically generate a message to your state senator and assembly person asking them to pass these lifesaving bills.

* according to the Governors Highway Safety Association

** from the NTSB

** This 85th percentile rule is laid out in the MUTCD (Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices).