

Metropolitan Desk; SECTA

More Bicyclists' Deaths Spur a New Safety Plan

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Things could not get much worse in early July after three cyclists were killed in just over a week on the streets of New York City.

But they did. Two more cyclists were hit and killed on Tuesday -- one in Brooklyn and another on Staten Island -- and another struck on Wednesday morning in Queens was reportedly in critical condition.

The growing toll of 17 biking fatalities this year -- seven more than all of last year -- has provoked an outcry from cyclists and transportation advocates and ratcheted up pressure on Mayor Bill de Blasio, a Democrat running for president, to better protect cyclists at a time when biking is booming across the city.

In response, Mr. de Blasio plans to unveil a \$58.4 million bike safety plan this week that will try to make cycling safer by rapidly installing more protected bike lanes, redesigning intersections to make turns safer for cyclists and hiring 80 new city transportation workers dedicated to bike improvements.

Mr. de Blasio's signature transportation policy, Vision Zero, has sought to make city streets safer.

"This year, we've seen a dangerous surge in cyclist fatalities," said Mr. de Blasio. "No loss of life on our streets is acceptable. Last year was the safest year on record and we have to keep pushing the envelope and increasing our efforts."

Under the new plan, the city will increasingly focus on creating a citywide network of protected bike lanes; currently the city has 1,243 miles of bike lanes, of which 480 miles are protected, meaning barriers physically separate cyclists from vehicles.

The city will now add 30 miles of protected bike lanes a year, up from an average of 20 miles a year over the past three years.

In addition, city officials will also expand bike lanes -- including protected lanes -- in 10 designated "bike priority districts" in Brooklyn and Queens that have relatively few bike lanes, but have had large numbers of serious injuries and fatalities involving cyclists.

These districts will cover neighborhoods including Corona, East Elmhurst and Jackson Heights in Queens, and Bay Ridge, Midwood, Sheepshead Bay and Brownsville in Brooklyn. This year, 12 of the 17 cycling fatalities happened in Brooklyn.

City transportation officials also plan to redesign 50 intersections to make cyclists more visible to turning motorists by using measures such as bike boxes, where cyclists wait in front of vehicles, and bike lanes painted green to provide more of a visual cue.

They will also expand a pilot program known as the "green wave" that adjusts the timing of green light signals so that all traffic -- including cyclists -- going about 15 miles per hour can pass one green light after another in a corridor. It reduces the temptation of running a red light and also slows down traffic.

The bulk of the money for the bike safety program will be used to hire more city transportation workers to carry out the improvements, adding to the 110 workers the city currently employs.

Police officers will also step up enforcement of traffic rules at 100 high-crash intersections, specifically targeting trucks. This month, the police had already discontinued a widely criticized practice of issuing tickets to cyclists breaking traffic rules at a site following a fatal crash.

"I think the things we are proposing here are things we know work," said Polly Trottenberg, the city's transportation commissioner. "Building out protected infrastructure, safer intersection designs, and targeted enforcement of dangerous driving behaviors."

The mayor's plan drew cautious praise from some cycling advocates, who said the measure would help the city -- and the mayor -- focus their attention on bike safety.

"We think on paper it looks good -- we need more protected bike lanes," said Jon Orcutt, the communication director for Bike New York, an education and advocacy group. "But the devil is in the implementation."

To really safeguard cyclists, Mr. Orcutt said, the new bike lanes would have to connect to other protected bike lanes instead of ending and forcing cyclists into traffic lanes.

He said the barriers should also be placed close together and be sturdy enough to keep cars from crossing into the bike lanes. Cars have driven through or right over flexible plastic rods that currently run alongside some lanes.

Cycling has exploded in New York as Citi Bike, the bike-share program, has expanded and growing frustration with subway and bus delays have pushed more commuters to take to two wheels.

About 460,000 bike rides take place in the city every day, up from about 180,000 bike rides in 2006, according to the city.

At the same time, the city's streets have become more congested than ever as Uber, Lyft and ride-app services have proliferated and truck traffic has surged from Amazon and online grocery deliveries.

"We have a toxic mix on the street with more cars, more trucks and more bikes," Mr. Orcutt said. "I think that's catching up with the city."

Councilman Ydanis Rodriguez, who is chairman of the City Council's transportation committee, said the mayor's plan was a step in the right direction but far more needed to be done. He has called for the city to build 100 miles of protected bike lanes a year over the next six years.

"We have seen larger numbers of New Yorkers are using bikes as a mode of transportation," he said. "We need to plan for that growth."

Several cyclists said they welcomed more bike lanes as the city's streets have become more congested and harder to navigate.

Nevada Griffin, 35, who lives in Brooklyn, said he has almost collided with cars and delivery trucks numerous times.

"Anything that moves the city toward a more pedestrian friendly, bikeable city is a good thing," he said.