

Biking is not to his liking

Legislator's answer to injured mom's son: Nobody should ride in Suffolk

BY DAVID M. SCHWARTZ
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A Suffolk County lawmaker told a 17-year-old whose mother was struck by a van while bicycling that he doesn't believe anyone should ride a bicycle or motorcycle in the county.

Legis. Thomas F. Barraga (R-West Islip) said people shouldn't ride bikes at all — a response that has touched off a heated backlash on social media. “My personal feeling is that no one who lives in our hamlet or for that matter in Suffolk County should ever ride a bicycle or motorcycle,” Barraga wrote. “Suffolk County is a suburban automobile community — drivers expect to see other drivers on the road, not bicyclists and motorcyclists.”

Barraga made his comments in a Jan. 29 response to Matthew Cutrone, a senior at West Islip High School. Cutrone, 17, was fulfilling an assignment in an American government class to write to an elected official about an issue he was passionate about.

Sandy Cutrone, 50, a bank mortgage loan officer, was hit while riding on Montauk Highway in Babylon Village on Sept. 19 at 5:30 p.m., according to a police report. The driver of the van was turning left and said he didn't see her, the report says.

Sandy Cutrone said she suffered a severe concussion and broken scapula, hasn't been able to work since, and still suffers from vision problems.

Matthew suggested in his Dec. 16 letter to Barraga that “some sort of bike lane or maybe even just some warning signs” be located “in certain areas so that drivers can know when to be careful of bicyclists.”

He said he “didn't expect to get a reaction like that” from Barraga. “It seemed pretty rude and messed up in a way, to say people shouldn't ride bikes and motorcycles.”

Said his mother: “I had to read it three times to let it sink in.” She said she called Barraga's office and left a message that she wouldn't be voting for him again.

Barraga stood by his letter. “I'm not going to tell them what they want to hear, a lot of fluff,” he said in an interview. “I tell them the truth.”

In his letter to Matthew, Barraga began by wishing his mother a speedy recovery. But Barraga said he advises all his constituents not to take up bicycling because of the risk. “They usually do not listen — 90 percent of these people eventually were hit by an automobile, many like your mother with serious physical injuries,” Barraga wrote.

While he offered no figures to



Sandy Cutrone and son Matthew, 17, at home in West Islip. He holds a letter from Legis. Thomas F. Barraga, below.



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back up his assertion, Barraga said it seems as if everyone he knows who bicycles eventually gets hit by a car.

In 2012, the last year with available statistics, 388 bicyclists were injured in crashes with vehicles in Suffolk and the same amount were hurt in Nassau County, according to the state Department of Motor Vehicles. There were seven bicyclists killed in crashes with vehicles in Suffolk in 2012 and three in Nassau, according to the DMV statistics.

Barraga said in the interview

that he also advises against running on the streets.

“The odds are against you,” he said. “Go to the gym. Go to your basement. Don't run around.”

He said people still get hit in bike lanes and motorists ignore warnings.

Presiding Officer Legis. DuWayne Gregory (D-Amityville) said with the obesity problem in America, “every form of exercise should be encouraged.”

Sandy Cutrone said she started cycling for exercise and has participated in biking events to raise money for the American Heart Association and the Wounded Warrior Project. At the time of the accident she was wearing a helmet, which she credits with saving her life.

Cutrone's Facebook post of a blurry photo of Barraga's letter was shared more than 1,400 times as of last night, and she was getting messages of support from as far away as California.

Josh Wilson, executive direc-

tor New York Bicycling Coalition, cited DMV data showing that in 2011, cycling fatalities in Suffolk made up almost 20 percent of the state's total.

But Barraga is “placing blame on the victims,” Wilson said.

Samuel Slaton, spokesman for the advocacy group Bike New York, said, “It is incumbent on lawmakers, drivers, and cyclists and pedestrians to ensure that public streets — suburban or otherwise — are safe for everyone.”

Barraga said he prides himself on his constituent services and responding to letters. “I try to be compassionate, but I always try to tell them the truth,” he said.

LETTER
Read Legis. Thomas F. Barraga's response to Matthew Cutrone.
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COPS: HIT-RUN DRIVER COVERS HIS VICTIM

BY NICOLE FULLER
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A hit-and-run driver in East

Garden City struck a man, then covered his victim with a blanket before fleeing the scene in a dark pickup truck Wednesday,

police said yesterday.

The 54-year-old man was struck about 5:54 p.m. Wednesday as he walked across Com-

mercial Avenue, Nassau police said. He suffered a severe head laceration and fractured pelvis and was taken to a hospital in serious condition, police said.

The driver got out of his vehicle and “covered the victim with a blanket before fleeing

the scene without identifying himself,” police said.

The pickup had “a cab and a two-tone bottom,” police said. Anyone with information can call Crime Stoppers at 800-244-8477. All calls will be kept confidential.