

Newsday



Daniel Flanzig with State Assemblyman Hennessey

Safer roads demanded for bikers and walkers

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Assemb. Edward Hennessey (D-Brookhaven) called Saturday for \$20 million in additional state funding to make streets safer for cyclists and pedestrians and for tougher penalties for hit-and-run drivers.

"Our roadways are dangerous, people are getting killed at almost epidemic rates," Hennessey said at a news conference in Patchogue. "It's time to complete our streets and make things safer and strengthen penalties."

Hennessey said increased spending is needed to help make roads safer for bicyclists and pedestrians and slow down drivers. Advocates called for streets to be designed with pedestrians and bicyclists in mind, not just motorists, with measures including bicycle lanes, sidewalks and medians. "More people are walking, more people are biking," said Eric Alexander, executive director at Vision Long Island. "We need to design our roadways with just common sense solutions."

According to state data supplied by Hennessey's office, 15.6 percent of the 45 fatal bike crashes in the state in 2012 were in Suffolk County, which census data show has about 7.6 percent of the state's population. Fatal bike accidents in Nassau and Suffolk were 22.2 percent of the state total that year.

"Drivers -- they don't respect that cyclists belong on the road," said Norm Samuels, 69, a cyclist and retired software engineer from Port Jefferson Station who joined two dozen or so cyclists and runners at the news conference at North Ocean Avenue and Shaber Road, where Melinda Resto, 29, was fatally hit by a car in December 2012.

Last year, Hennessey introduced legislation that would increase prison time for drivers who leave the scene of an accident in which someone was killed or seriously injured, a crime called aggravated leaving the scene of an accident without reporting. The top penalty would increase to 5 to 15 years, from 2 1/3 to 7 years, for someone who fled a fatal accident and had a prior DWI conviction.

He planned to amend his bill to match one introduced last year by state Sen. Lee Zeldin (R-Shirley) that would change the classification for leaving a fatal accident to a C felony from a D felony. Zeldin's chief of staff, Chris Molluso, said the sticking point between the two bills has been a constitutional issue over penalties that would apply retroactively in some cases.

"If he's considering some amendments, we'd be very open to looking at them," Molluso said.