

LONG ISLAND **SUFFOLK**

# Plan to crack down on reckless bicyclists rolls before Suffolk lawmakers



Daniel Flanzig, an attorney who litigates cycling issues, said if Long Island lawmakers want to make streets safer, they should focus on cars. Flanzig is pictured outside his Mineola law office. Credit: Newsday/Thomas A. Ferrara

**By Jesse Coburn** November 18, 2020 3:44 PM

Long Island lawmakers are taking on reckless bicyclists, whose wheelie-popping, traffic-law-flouting ways are intimidating motorists and putting themselves and others in danger, officials say.

But bike advocates are pushing back against legislation aimed at curbing dangerous biking, arguing the threat posed by cyclists pales against the dangers of the 2-ton motorized machines that predominate on the Island's roads and kill more than 100 people in the region every year.

This debate is coming to a head in Suffolk County, the latest local government to consider a "reckless biking" bill.

Suffolk Legis. Rudy Sunderman (R-Shirley) has introduced the measure in question, advancing it on behalf of the late Legis. Tom Muratore, who first spearheaded the effort. If passed, it would prohibit "trick riding, weaving, or zigzagging" on a bike, among other provisions. Violators could see their bikes impounded, receive \$250 fines or spend 15 days in jail.

The measure is to be discussed Thursday in the legislature's Public Safety Committee and could undergo further revisions, Sunderman said.

It is similar to bills passed by Nassau County, and Babylon and Lindenhurst villages, last year. Local officials have cited the rise of "ride outs" as the impetus for such legislation.

The group bike rides, often organized on social media, can swell to dozens of teenagers traveling en masse down streets. Sometimes they ride against traffic, YouTube videos show, performing stunts like jumping from pedal to pedal while balancing on one wheel. Sometimes they ride at night and play chicken with oncoming cars, officials say.

The outings have become increasingly common on Long Island in recent years. In some places, they're also increasingly hard to ignore.

"It's a real problem," said Gerard Glass, the village attorney for Babylon Village, a favorite meeting place for ride outs. "The merchants are up in arms about it, and rightfully so."

Glass said he knew of at least one person injured in Babylon by the teenage cyclists, and he has heard complaints of damage to cars as well.

The trend has fueled intense discussion on Facebook among residents, with some describing the teenage scofflaws as "animals" and "juvenile street

terrorists," and discussing mitigation measures including pepper spray, fire hoses and a ban on cycling downtown.

Babylon officials have so far opted for more a restrained response, passing legislation allowing the village to impound bikes and issue fines. Sunderman's office said the Suffolk bill would supersede Babylon's.

Proponents of such legislation say it has been effective.

"I think it really is working," said Nassau County Legis. John Ferretti (R-Levittown), who spearheaded two bicycle safety bills in Nassau last year.

"I was getting multiple calls a week last summer," Ferretti said of resident complaints about ride outs. Calls now are far rarer, he said.

Ferretti said he did not know how often police have issued fines or confiscated bikes through his legislation. A Nassau County police spokesman could not find any record of police issuing reckless-biking violations.

But Ferretti said the goal of the measures was to deter reckless riding, not to take kids' bikes.

Daniel Flanzig, board member of the New York Bicycling Coalition and attorney who litigates cycling issues, said if Long Island lawmakers want to make streets safer, they should focus on cars, which cause far more carnage than bikes. Instead, he said, the reckless-cycling measures seem aimed more at easing motorists' anxieties than making streets safer.

"People are literally dying while they're dealing with presumed fears," he said.

Flanzig said reckless cycling can already be prosecuted under the state's Vehicle and Traffic Law, making the local bills unnecessary. He called them disproportionate.

"I can speed through a school zone at two o'clock in the afternoon 10 times and my car won't be taken away from me," he said. "But I do a wheelie on my bike and they take away my bike."

Car crashes killed 189 people on Long Island last year, including 13 cyclists, according to data collected by the Institute for Traffic Safety Management and Research in Albany. Nassau and Suffolk had the first and second highest rates respectively of fatalities and injuries from car crashes of any county in the state last year.

The institute does not track the number of people killed or injured by cyclists, and Suffolk and Nassau police spokespeople said their departments do not do so, either.

Road safety researchers questioned the value of reckless-cyclist legislation.

Nick Ferenchak, a University of New Mexico civil engineering professor, said the measures may prevent some injuries but would be less effective at making streets safe than cracking down on speeding and drunken driving.

"It's not the best use of those resources," he said.

Dan Piatkowski, a professor of community and regional planning at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said a survey of 17,000 people he conducted found that drivers, cyclists and pedestrians all reported regularly breaking traffic laws. But he said scofflaw cyclists might be more noticeable because fewer people bike than drive, and driver infractions like speeding are so common.

Officials on Long Island pushed back against such critiques.

Sunderman noted the Suffolk Legislature is also considering a bill requiring drivers to leave 3 feet between their cars and cyclists.

"We can do both," he said of combating reckless driving and cycling alike.

Ferretti said the Nassau legislation was targeted at the teenage ride outs, not everyday cyclists.

"If you are operating your bicycle in Nassau County legally, safely, this does not affect you at all," he said. "It only applies to those who are essentially terrorizing operators of vehicles and pedestrians."