

Two-Wheeled Targets

Written by Erik Bojnansky, BT Senior Writer; Photos by Silvia Ros
May 2017

Miami is a very dangerous place for bicyclists, but Plan Z offers hope for change



May is National Bike Month across the land, and has been since its designation in 1956 by the League of American Bicyclists. The group's website proclaims National Bike Month as "an opportunity to celebrate the unique power of the bicycle and the many reasons we ride," and a time to encourage more of us to take up the sport.

But Greater Miami isn't like the rest of the nation. "In Miami-Dade County, [Bike Month] is March because it's too hot for us in May," explains Sue Kawalerski, president of the Everglades Bicycle Club and head of the county's Bike305 program.

On this particular Sunday in mid-March, Kawalerski, a former television news consultant, is standing in the middle of NE 19th Avenue in North Miami Beach's downtown. Any other day, Kawalerski would risk being hit by a car. But today the cars have been blocked off from NE 19th Avenue by steel barricades, squad cars, vans, and an armored police mobile command center. Instead of vehicular traffic, NE 19th Avenue is filled with vendor booths, food trucks, a sound stage, a bounce house, and people with bicycles. Lots of bicycles.

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The cordoned-off area in front of the North Miami Beach City Hall is a starting point for the city's Ciclovía ("cycleway" in Spanish) a mile-long bike ride along the Snake Creek Trail, one of a couple of dozen bike trails that exist around Miami-Dade County.

But to get from NE 19th Avenue to the Snake Creek Canal, the hundreds of bicyclists, many of them wearing orange "Bike305" T-shirts, will have to ride across streets outside the cordoned area. For this reason, the North Miami Beach Police Department has provided an escort, temporarily blocking off other intersections so the all-ages crowd can reach Snake Creek Trail safely. Without that police escort, chances are pretty decent that a car might slam into a couple of bicyclists riding in the event, in spite of their orange shirts.

Kawalerski, a resident of Miami-Dade County and an avid bicyclist since she was 18, is familiar with the hazards of bicycling in South Florida.



"I've had many close calls, and I got hit on Key Biscayne," she says. "Drivers are unconscious. They were driving unconsciously even back in the 1970s. And [driving unconsciously] got worse with the advent of smart phones. People start doing everything except driving when they're behind the wheel."

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Kawalerski is far from being alone in her anxiety about Miami drivers. The *BT* has interviewed more than a dozen bicycle enthusiasts over the past few months. Many of them have told their own stories about being hit by cars or harassed by drivers, or about friends and acquaintances killed on the road.

“I’ve been in five accidents with a car,” says Jameson Jones, president of the Magic City Bicycle Collective. “My scariest one was when I woke up in a hospital, not knowing what happened. I was blindsided at an intersection in Miami Beach by a valet.”

Or ask Hunter Hoover, a 25-year-old woodworker active in the Magic City Bicycle Collective and Critical Mass Miami about his experiences. “Are you kidding me?” he vents. “I’ve had people throw food at me while I was riding my bicycle for no reason at all.”

Florida has long been a dangerous place for bicyclists. Between 1975 and 2012, the fatality rate for bicycle accidents in the Sunshine State exceeded that of every other state in the continental U.S., according to a 2015 Centers for Disease Control report.

And among Florida counties, Miami-Dade is near the top in terms of number of automobile-related bicycle accidents, and fatalities.

In 2016, according to the most recent data from the Florida Highway Patrol, 737 bicyclists were hit by cars, or ran into cars, in Miami-Dade, a figure that is second only to Broward’s 749 car-related bike accidents. Last year, Miami-Dade had 81 bike-related accidents that resulted in incapacitating injuries, the second-highest in Florida. (Orange County, which includes Orlando, had 91.) As for the county that had the most fatalities? Miami-Dade and Broward tied, with each county having 13 car-related fatal bike accidents.

Bicycling advocates blame the high number of accidents on a lack of protected bicycle lanes and automobile drivers who are oblivious.

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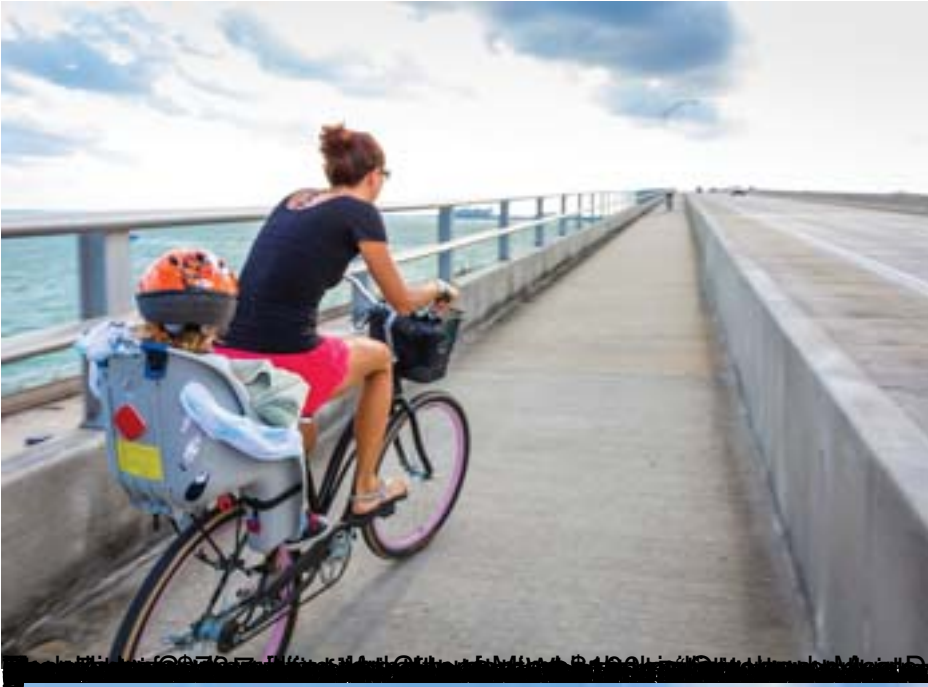
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