

Can Bicycles and Pedestrians Co-exist? *By Ruth A. Rin Burlington Buzz, September 24, 2022*

As a senior couple living in Burlington, we were recently looking forward to a leisurely stroll in nature. The stress of COVID and economic uncertainty of our times were wearing on us, and this seemed just the ticket. We knew of a popular trail in a nearby town that we had never tried and headed for it on a beautiful day, eager to try it out.

We parked the car and walked over to the trail, bordered by lush greenery. A gentle breeze made the scene all the more idyllic. But soon our fight-flight response went into high gear. Within minutes of hitting the trail, we knew something was wrong. Glancing to our left we saw a small army of cyclists bearing down on us at top speed. To make matters worse, cyclists were hugging the shoulders of the trail on both the right and left sides. This served to give them the most space while, in effect, forcing pedestrians to walk in the middle. Worried about these clearly unsafe conditions, we were about to leave, when tragedy struck.

Despite our vigilance, out of nowhere, a speeding bike struck my back, knocking me to the ground. While I was lying there in severe pain, with people hovering over me, several more bicycles came whizzing by, inches from my head. Exasperated, we had to yell at them to slow down.

My partner phoned for an ambulance, and I was transported to the ER where the care was excellent. A CAT scan revealed 3 broken ribs, as well as less serious injuries to my arm and leg, not to mention the emotional trauma sustained by both of us. As seniors just trying to enjoy a quiet holiday stroll in the woods, the experience felt like being on a kind of super-highway for bicycles. As a result of this accident, I was in extreme pain, faced a recovery period of at least six weeks, and was unable to work for a significant portion of that time.

I was fortunate not to have been paralyzed or killed in this incident. In fact, similar accidents have injured people in other locations in Massachusetts. As an example, in March 2019, in Lexington, an elderly man was indeed killed on the Minuteman Trail in a bike accident.

Apart from the physical injury, I was also hurt and angry that such an accident could even occur. I told the story to friends and acquaintances, both locally and in other states, and learned from them that many had close calls as pedestrians on other so-called "shared trails". Some said they would never risk their safety by doing it again.

I am not opposed to the concept of "shared trails", but not without any regulation. These trails were designed for the enjoyment of all citizens. They are not race-courses for some cyclists who seem to view pedestrians as annoyances or obstacles to their own enjoyment. Cyclists certainly deserve to have a safe place to bike, but not at the expense of pedestrian safety.

With climate change and the need to cut back on the use of fossil-fuels, more and more people have turned to cycling here in Burlington and in surrounding towns. That in itself is commendable. However, these trails, designed years ago, have failed to keep up with the increasing numbers of bicycles. It's a matter of urgency that states step forward and institute safety regulations to protect both pedestrians and cyclists to avert further tragedies. Hopefully Burlington residents will support local and statewide efforts to regulate bike safety.

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