

‘Safer Streets Now’ Say Advocates, as Chelsea Deaths Hit Double Digits

By Scott Stiffler on August 29, 2019 · No Comment



Several accidents have occurred this summer at W. 23rd St. and Sixth Ave., noted by Sen. Brad Hoylman as “the most dangerous intersection for cyclists.” | Photo by Scott Stiffler

BY WINNIE McCROY | Warm weather brings more people outside to enjoy cycling and sightseeing, but this summer’s fun has been marred by alarming rates of pedestrian and cyclist fatalities.

As of Aug. 15, there have been 70 pedestrian fatalities citywide since January—12 more deaths than this time last year. And 19 of them have happened in Chelsea, many along the high-traffic areas where Eighth Ave. crosses W. 23rd St., and where Sixth Ave. bisects W. 15th St., leaving community members to wonder whether poor street design or motorist negligence is to blame.

“It is extremely distressing to learn that there have been 19 deaths this year, and we’re not even in the full swing of fall yet,” State Senator Brad Hoylman told Chelsea Community News. “I’m pleased that Vision Zero has come up with a strategy, which is a recognition of the problem by City Administration at least, but

they have not yet begun to prevent pedestrians and cyclist deaths. Just a few steps outside our office is where the first Citi Bike cyclist was killed last year, on West 26th Street, in Chelsea. Since then, there is now a protected crosstown bike lane. But it's a very bittersweet innovation, because it literally took the death of a young father of two to build a bike lane."

In 2018, the NYC Department of Transportation (DOT) installed the city's first crosstown protected bike lanes, on 26th and 29th Sts. But sadly, the death of that cyclist has not been the last.

In the morning hours of June 24, police found 20-year-old bike messenger Robyn Hightman lying near Sixth Ave. and W. 24th St., unconscious, and with head trauma. She was taken to Bellevue Hospital, where she was pronounced dead. Hightman was hit by a white Freightliner delivery truck, whose driver, 54-year-old Antonio Garcia, left the scene, but later returned. The driver, issued five summonses at the scene for equipment violations, said he was driving less than 20 miles an hour when someone told him a cyclist had collided with the back of his truck.

That cyclist was Hightman, an ambassador for the women's cycling team Hagens Berman-Supermint, whose impromptu vigil drew hundreds of mourners. At that point, she was the twelfth cyclist killed on city streets in 2019.

Tweeted New York City Council Speaker (and Chelsea's District 3 res) Corey Johnson at the time, "Robyn's death is a tragedy and so is the number of cyclist deaths so far this year. Let's get serious about making our streets safer for everyone."

Pedestrians have faced similar peril walking through Chelsea.

On July 31, 60-year-old Michael Collopy was struck by a cyclist in the bike lane on Sixth Ave. and W. 23rd St., just after 11:50am. The cyclist did not remain at the scene, and Collopy, who suffered head trauma, died at Bellevue Hospital. The New York Police Department (NYPD) is still searching for the cyclist.

"We really need to take a hard look at street design, especially in places like 23rd Street and Sixth Avenue, noted as the most dangerous intersection for cyclists," said Sen. Hoylman. "Just a couple blocks from that intersection, earlier this month, a cyclist was killed by a hit-and-run. We also need to look at how we measure success. Up to now, the level of service has been mostly measured by how fast cars move, and not how many people are

moving via public transit, walking, or bicycles. And it doesn't consider whether people are safe from harm."

Sen. Hoylman believes this metric doesn't represent the realities of moving through Manhattan, and that congestion pricing legislation passed this year (but not in effect until 2021) will help discourage cars and trucks from driving into Manhattan—making it safer for pedestrians and cyclists and better for the environment.

"We also need to see an increase in the number of speed cameras in school zones. I don't know why there is a cap on these cameras to begin with. It rankles me that we can't have speed cameras at every corner. They are shown to reduce fatalities, crashes, and the speed of cars. If they're that successful, they should have them everywhere," Sen. Hoylman added. "I also have introduced legislation to require 'rear underside' guards on trucks, which are protective mechanisms that, in the event of a crash with a pedestrian, can prevent the individual from being crushed under the wheels of the truck."

These rear guards may have helped protect Hightman, but would not have helped the 77-year-old woman struck and killed by a cabbie at the corner of Eighth Ave. and W. 22nd St. on the afternoon of Aug. 8. The woman was rushed to Bellevue Hospital, where she was pronounced dead.

Witnesses originally said driver Daniel Fusaro attempted to flee the scene and was stopped. Police charged him with leaving the scene of an accident, failure to obey a traffic signal, failure to yield to a pedestrian, and failure to exercise due care.

Several days later, on Aug. 10, at the corner of Sixth Ave. and W. 15th St., 67-year-old Melissa McClure was struck by a pickup truck while sightseeing with her sister. She sustained a massive head injury, and died after a week at Bellevue Hospital. The 32-year-old driver of the 2011 Chevrolet Silverado remained at the scene.

And again, on the evening of Aug. 11, a 57-year-old woman was critically injured in the crosswalk of Sixth Ave. and W. 16th St. She too was rushed to Bellevue Hospital.

Paul Groncki, president of the 100 W. 16th Street Block Association and a board member of Hudson Guild, the Council of Chelsea Block Associations, and the Chelsea Reform Democratic Club, said pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists must all pay more

attention. He recounted a recent situation when he got brushed by a cyclist who wasn't paying attention, but admitted that he hadn't waited for the walk signal, either. Part of the problem, he posited, was that many cyclists just don't know the rules of the road.

"Cyclists don't follow traffic rules, because most have never driven," Groncki noted. "There isn't enough education. We spend money on MTA ads that warn people not to try and beat the fares, so why can't we spend money to teach people the rules of the road?"

If it seems like you're hearing about a lot more fatalities this summer, it's not imagined. NYPD TrafficStat numbers reveal a 25.7% percent increase in traffic crash fatalities. For 2019, there are 137 reported traffic fatalities, while at this point in 2018, there were 109.

But the NYPD appears to be taking steps to mitigate the problem. In an Aug. 16 press release, the Deputy Commissioner of Public Information (DCPI) announced the return of Vision Zero's "Warm Weather Weekends" traffic safety campaign. The NYPD and the DOT alerted the community that the weekend's sunny forecast would be "very similar to last weekend's weather—when New York City saw six fatalities in five different crashes in Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx."

"The NYPD is stepping up its enforcement of speeding drivers this weekend," NYPD Chief of Transportation Thomas Chan said in the release. "Tragically, last weekend showed us that the blatant disregard of our speed laws are directly resulting in lives lost and families forever damaged. Our officers will be working to target this dangerous driving behavior. The NYPD is committed to Vision Zero; we expect all motorists to drive safely, and hold accountable all those that do not."

They warned that the nice weather would bring out more cyclists and pedestrians as well as speeding motorists, and they promised heightened enforcement from NYPD Highway Patrol and local precincts, each of which now has its own speed detection equipment. They urge drivers to turn slowly, yield to pedestrians, and to "look twice for motorcycles"—riders of which, they also warned, must have the right licensure and registration, and should avoid the risk of passing between vehicles.

"With the 'Warm Weather Weekends' campaign in full effect and

after seeing far too many tragedies this year, we and our Vision Zero partners are taking strong preventive action,” said DOT Commissioner Polly Trottenberg in that Aug. 16 press release. “Last weekend, we saw once again the unmistakable and dangerous results of speeding, with several horrible crashes. Our message to New Yorkers could not be simpler: We want you to get out there and enjoy this weekend—including at the final Saturday of our Summer Streets event. However, if you are driving a car or riding a motorcycle, please do so safely.”



On Eighth Ave. between W. 22nd & 26th Sts.—right in the heart of Chelsea
—numerous fatal crashes have occurred this summer. | Photo by Scott Stiffler

Elected officials like Sen. Hoylman and Speaker Johnson are working with the NYPD and DOT to deal with this increase in pedestrian fatalities.

“We are seeing a safe streets crisis throughout our city with both cyclist and pedestrian deaths way up compared to last year, and it breaks my heart that lives have been lost to traffic violence in Chelsea recently,” Speaker Johnson said. “I am actively working with DOT and Community Board 4 to ensure that dangerous intersections in our neighborhood see improvements, including signal modifications, as soon as possible. I am also working on legislation to create a Master Plan for city streets that would create a far better designed streetscape to keep pedestrians and cyclists safe and get New Yorkers where they need to go more efficiently.”

And on Manhattan’s west side, the pedestrian safety group Chekpeds has worked to balance vehicular traffic in the corridor

between Ninth and 11th Aves. In June, they successfully realized their long-held dream to make 11th Ave. one-way (only south). In August, they began the installation of bus loading platforms and a bike lane on the west side of the avenue. And once the number of commuters warrants it, they'll work to install an SBS (Select Bus Service) lane for the M12.

LPI ASAP, SAY SAFETY ADVOCATES

“The number of pedestrian fatalities this summer has been tragic, and Community District 4 is no exception,” Burt Lazarin, Chair of Manhattan Community Board 4 (MCB4), told Chelsea Community News. “Over the years MCB4 has focused on improving pedestrian and cyclists safety, however these recent crashes show that there is still a lot to be done to prevent future tragedies.”

And fellow MCB4 member and Chekped's co-founder Christine Berthet has been working hard to prevent these tragedies.

“They’ve worked so hard for so many years to try to reduce the fatalities and injuries, and seeing that all the changes made are still not sufficient is very frustrating and sad,” Berthet said. “We have to look at the cause of each crash separately and see: Is it something we can prevent by designing the street differently, or is it something about the way people drive?”

On Aug. 22, Berthet met with the DOT to look at places that could benefit from installing signals for a split LPI (leading pedestrian interval) that gives pedestrians and cyclists 10 seconds to cross before cars turn. Still, the DOT doesn't have unlimited resources to retrofit every intersection with LPIs.

The DOT said they take every fatality on the roadways seriously, evaluating the design of the street and the circumstances of all fatal crashes in order to improve the safety of that site, and other similar locations. But some insist it is not enough.

“They need to have this at every intersection where there's a left turn. I think we should be in the mode where we're rolling out infrastructure that's as safe as possible, and not just what's enough,” Berthet posited.

“Unfortunately you can't predict where crashes will happen, which is what this summer is teaching us in a very painful way.”

A DOT spokesperson said that by 2020, they will re-time the west

side of Manhattan from Sixth to 12th Aves. to install these LPI signals, with the goal of installing approximately 300 LPIs in the area, and an additional 700 LPIs citywide.



Paul Groncki wants a split signal and left turn lane with a light is needed at 16th St. and Sixth. | Photo by Scott Stiffler

“I’m with Christine Berthet on this; a split signal and left turn lane with a light is needed at 16th Street and Sixth, as well as at other intersections,” said Groncki. “If you stand at the corner [there], it looks like it’s laid out correctly with the turn lane and bike lane, but if you’re in a car driving up from the Village, there are construction sites on both sides of that intersection, it’s narrow with big barricades, and it’s easy to get distracted. A split lane stop with a green arrow there is critical to making people pay attention.

Berthet said while the components of Vision Zero and the redesign of streets are helping, in some cases, like the death of the cyclist at Sixth Ave. and W. 23rd St., it’s typically the drivers who are at fault.

“When drivers don’t respect people who share the same street space, what can we do?” Berthet asked. “We need police to be more stringent with both enforcement and education. Everyone needs to be raised to the level where they do the right thing in society. Because we’ve got a big problem here. Forty thousand traffic fatalities a year in the U.S. is a huge amount. I hope New York City steps up to the plate and says, ‘We’re not going to accept that here.’ ”

Zazel Loven, co-chair of the 300 West 23rd, 22nd, 21st Streets

Block Association, echoed this sentiment, saying, “The recent tragic traffic deaths of cyclists and pedestrians in Chelsea, and all over our city, are emblematic of how separate these three groups are. Drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians need to be aware of each other and follow the rules that will help us all live and travel together with respect. Education, awareness, and law enforcement are the keys to making driving, biking and walking safe for everyone.”

Groncki thinks traffic engineers need to further experiment with moving to a city model with less cars on the streets. He also believes cyclists should be required to be licensed, saying, “It could take two years to implement it, but if you start it up and confiscate those bikes not licensed, you could make it happen.”

For Sen. Hoylman, who stood as the lone Democratic vote against the 2018 state budget when it abandoned congestion pricing, the issue of safer streets was not a theoretical one.

“I have two young children, and when you’re on a city street pushing a baby carriage across an intersection, it can be frightening, because oftentimes, you’re not the priority of a driver who may be turning,” Sen. Hoylman said. “Vision Zero is a great framework, but it’s still far from achieving its goals, as evidenced by these tragedies.”

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