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Share the Road: SAPD Launches New Program to Catch Unsafe Drivers

Posted on December 19th, 2012

By [Iris Dimmick](http://www.therivardreport.com/labor-of-love-the-rivard-report-after-six-months/)



<http://www.therivardreport-com.zippykid.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/biopic.jpeg> Starting today, the San Antonio Police Department (SAPD) Bike Patrol begins a bike safety campaign that includes awareness efforts and sting operations to catch drivers who violate the City's Safe Passing Ordinance. The ordinance requires them to stay three to six feet away from bicycles, and all "[vulnerable road users](http://www.sanantonio.gov/oep/sabikes/docs/Ordinance%202010-02-04-0097.pdf)," while passing.

The initiative was officially launched by SAPD Chief William McManus at a morning press conference. Standing by him were a dozen officers and deputy chiefs as well as Mayor Julián Castro. Representatives from the cycling community, including [recently paralyzed](http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local_news/article/Injured-cyclist-s-allies-to-drivers-Pay-attention-3989060.php) triathlete [Monica Caban](http://www.facebook.com/MonicaCabansRoadToRecovery/), were front and center, too, a strong show of solidarity with local government and the SAPD.

[Read our coverage of a meeting held earlier this month to discuss the safety campaign and the petition that triggered it here: [Meeting Sparks Positive Developments for Bike Safety](http://www.therivardreport.com/meeting-sparks-positive-developments-for-bike-safety/) .]



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Monica Caban and Mayor Castro, just after the press conference.

“Over the last couple of years we’ve seen too many instances of cyclists on the road who have gotten injured or killed because the driver was not paying sufficient attention. This campaign is meant to raise awareness about the need to respect everybody’s right to use the road,” Mayor Castro said. “It’s also meant to catch folks who do not operate responsibly, to utilize undercover police (and) to help ensure that cycling safety become a reality in San Antonio.”

Caban was struck from behind by an elderly woman driving a pick-up truck in October while riding her bike, leaving her paralyzed from the waist down. She spent about a month recovering in the hospital and is still undergoing rehabilitation.

“I’m an example of what can happen,” Caban said, who hopes her story will encourage more motorists to pay attention. She’s confident that she will regain the use of her legs with “time, patience, hope and prayer. I’ll get there.”



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The press conference held today on the front steps of the Public Safety Headquarters.

Sting operations will begin today throughout the city. McManus encouraged public involvement, adding, “anyone that wants to ride with them can certainly do that.”

Many cyclists have expressed frustration over the lack of enforcement of the safe passing ordinance since its passage by City council in 2010. If an officer doesn’t witness the actual violation, a ticket is not issued. McManus hopes the presence of undercover officers on bicycles will deter motorists who only obey the law when a marked police car is within view.

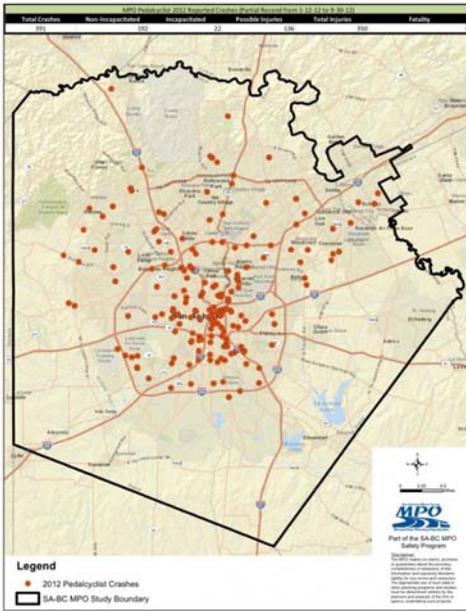
According to statistics from the [San Antonio Metropolitan Planning Organization \(http://www.sametroplan.org/\)](http://www.sametroplan.org/) (MPO), vehicle-bicycle accidents have spiked recently, despite the new ordinance, as more and cyclists take to the roadways. There were 232 accidents in 2011, and 391 by August of this year (see map).

<http://www-therivardreport-com.zippykid.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/MPO-Reported-Bicycle-Crashes-2012.jpg>

Click for larger image.

“It’s not a matter of having a yard-stick there and measuring,” Chief McManus said, “You have to give clear passage, you just have to give a wide berth to folks on bicycles ... the benefit of the doubt goes to the vulnerable road user.”

The SAPD’s awareness campaign includes various partner organizations: the [City’s Office of Sustainability \(http://www.sanantonio.gov/ocp/SustainabilityPlan.asp?res=1280&ver=true\)](http://www.sanantonio.gov/ocp/SustainabilityPlan.asp?res=1280&ver=true) ([SA Bikes \(http://www.sanantonio.gov/ocp/sabikes/\)](http://www.sanantonio.gov/ocp/sabikes/)), the Mayor’s Office, the [San Antonio Metropolitan Planning Organization \(http://www.sametroplan.org/\)](http://www.sametroplan.org/) (MPO), local bike shops and other cycling advocacy organizations. The campaign will utilize social media and PSAs for television and radio, McManus said, and will be directed at both cyclists and drivers.



Part of that message will address the dangers of distracted driving, officials said.

For some, the car has become a second office or home on the road. Drivers eat, text, talk, and check email. Passengers can even watch television.

“One of the biggest problems on the road is the distracted driver,” said Dr. Bill Shea, board chairman of [BikeTexas](#), the Austin-based non-profit bike advocacy group.

We’ve become so accustomed to being strapped to a couple of tons of metal, separated and (barely) protected from the outside world, that sometimes we forget that at the end of the trip we’re all just meat and bones. Bicyclists, however, have a hard time forgetting that fact – often only a few layers of clothing separating them from asphalt, concrete and other vehicles on the road.

“A lot of people are just simply unaware – having never been on a bicycle on the roadway (or) having never gone out to jog on the road – I don’t think those folks understand how dangerous it can be when (vulnerable users) are not given a wide enough berth,” McManus said after the conference. “I also think we have people who just resent bicyclists on the roadway and will go out of their way to [buzz](http://bicycling.com/blogs/roadrights/2011/12/22/buzz-kill/) them ... those folks who intentionally are unconcerned about cyclist safety, this enforcement will address that.”

Bicyclists: We’re Traffic, not Obstacles

Relations between bicyclists and some motorists can be tense, even hostile – escalating to confrontations on and off the road. This tension is not limited to San Antonio.

“Most anger comes from fear,” said Jack Sanford, safe routes program manager at BikeTexas. “Cyclists are going to be angry at the driver for putting their life in danger and drivers are equally afraid of hitting cyclists ... they’re scared, their adrenalin is up.”

Both parties have a small group that are guilty of perpetuating tension and negative stereotypes: bicyclists that weave dangerously through traffic jams and run stop signs and red lights, and motorists that aggressively pass too close by, lean on their horns, or shout obscenities and various versions of, "Get off the road!"



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Beau Edwards, Bicycle Heaven.

Beau Edwards, sales manager at [Bicycle Heaven](http://www.bicycle-heaven.com/) (<http://www.bicycle-heaven.com/>), has heard it all – from personal and customer experience.

"Get a car!"

"You don't pay for these roads!"

"Alright, tree-hugger."

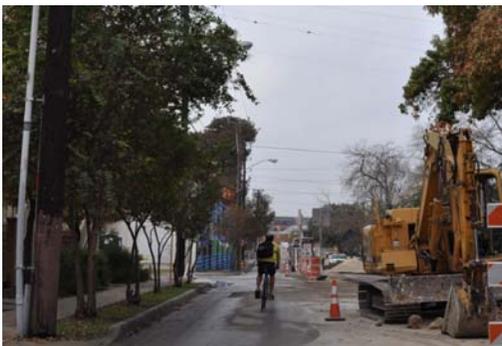
Edwards rides his bike about 10 miles a day to and from work, just north of Loop 410 in Castle Hills. He certainly doesn't identify as a "tree-hugger." We all pay for roads. Yes, he also drives a car.

"I've leaned to use a five-finger wave instead of the one," Edwards said.

He often ventures downtown, trains for races and runs errands all over San Antonio, averaging more than 20 hours a week on his bike. He's had several close-calls and a few collisions and admits that sometimes he's at fault. Ever since he suffered a serious concussion in an accident in Austin, he has worn a helmet.

"Downtown, the bike population is growing and people expect to see them," Edwards said, "Bikes are becoming much more a part of normal traffic."

It's the traffic outside of downtown, between neighborhoods, that poses the greatest risk, Edwards said. Low speed limits and frequent stops make drivers and bicyclists more aware of each other downtown. Long stretches of roads with speed limits above 40 mph and small or nonexistent bike lanes are the most dangerous.



http://www-therivardreport-com.zippykid.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/DSC_0035.jpg

Bicyclist on South Alamo Street. Photo by Iris Dimmick.

"And bike lanes are a joke," Edwards said, citing their proximity to parked cars and tendency to have drainage grates and trash within the barriers.

"The (Safe Passing) ordinance is unenforceable," he said, "The responsibility is on people who ride bikes ... to ride defensively, assume no one sees you ... and ride predictably."

Edwards believes most disagreements cyclists and motorists stem from ignorance – or straight up disregard – of traffic laws by both groups.

While bikes are vehicles, Edwards suggested it might be better to reclassify them into a new category between pedestrians and motorized vehicle with their own laws. The “**stop as yield, red as stop** (<http://bicyclerlaw.com/articles/a.cfm/legally-speaking-stop-as-yield1>)” law in Idaho is an example of such a law that makes exceptions for bicycles at stop signs, treated as a yield, and red lights, treated as a stop sign.

Hostile encounters are outliers, but they speak volumes about the rough transition from car-centered streets to the “**complete street** (<http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets/complete-streets-fundamentals>)” concept – roadways used by pedestrians and cyclists, not only motorists.

Why We Need Bike Safety

The promotion of bicycling is a part of most **local** (<http://www.sanantonio.gov/ocp/sabikes/>), **state** (http://www.dot.state.tx.us/public_involvement/bicycle_committee.htm) and **federal** (<http://www.fitness.gov/be-active/ways-to-be-active/>) programs and efforts for public health, environmental, and transportation sustainability reasons.

The **SA Bikes** (<http://www.sanantonio.gov/ocp/sabikes/>) program, under the City’s Sustainability Office, has been tasked with the goal of increasing ridership and improving safety for pedestrians and bicyclists in the city. It’s coordinating its efforts with those of the SAPD and the MPO. Part of the city’s goal is to promote road equity, said SA Bikes Program Manager Julia Diana.

“We’re not doing away with cars, it’s about having the (option) to get around on a bike,” Diana said, “If you’re too young or too old (to drive) or can’t afford a car ... (safe bike routes) mean freedom for a lot of people.”

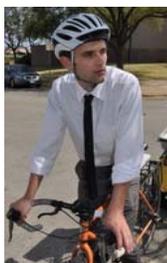


(http://www.therivardreport.com.zippykid.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/DSC_0071.jpg)

Julia Diana at SA Bikes with their new safety campaign posters. Photo by Iris Dimmick.

SA Bikes is currently working on creating bike-friendly corridors and complete street infrastructure throughout the city. Check out the master plan: **San Antonio Bike Plan and Implementation Strategy** (<http://www.sanantonio.gov/ocp/sabikes/bicycleMP.aspx>).

“Bikes also reduce the amount of traffic for everybody,” Sanford said. “On top of that you’ve got improvements to people’s health, air quality, economy ... **cyclists on average spend more money at local businesses** (<http://www.theatlanticcities.com/commute/2012/12/cyclists-and-pedestrians-can-end-spending-more-each-month-drivers/4066/>). Increased cycling benefits everyone, whether you get on a bike or not, it’s one less car.”



(http://www-therivardreport-com.zippykid.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Jack_Sanford.jpeg)

Jack Sanford, photo courtesy of BikeTexas.

Sanford grew up in San Antonio and regularly commutes from Austin to take part in bike-talks such as the [Bicycle Mobility Advisory Committee \(http://www.sametroplan.org/Committees/BMAC/bmac.html\)](http://www.sametroplan.org/Committees/BMAC/bmac.html) (BMAC) and the [brainstorming meeting earlier this month \(http://www.therivardreport.com/meeting-sparks-positive-developments-for-bike-safety/\)](http://www.therivardreport.com/meeting-sparks-positive-developments-for-bike-safety/). He was also present at the press conference today.

“It’s amazing how much this city has changed,” Sanford said. “When I left I didn’t think San Antonio would ever be somewhere to live without a car ... (now it is) but there is still work to do.”

Once enough education, awareness, and infrastructure is dedicated to creating a safe environment for bicyclists of all skill levels and demographics, Sanford says that bicyclists will find “[safety in numbers \(http://injuryprevention.bmj.com/content/9/3/205.abstract\)](http://injuryprevention.bmj.com/content/9/3/205.abstract)” – like many metropolitan cities around the world enjoy.



http://www-therivardreport-com.zippykid.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/DSC_00151.jpg

Separated bike lane on Avenue B near the Pearl. Lanes physically separated with a barrier, said Sanford, are one of the most effective ways to reduce collisions. Unfortunately, it’s one of the most expensive ways, too, he said.

BikeTexas is currently working on legislation to make the Safe Passing ordinances and texting ban state laws and to extend the San Antonio ordinance that bans cell phone use in school zones to all city streets.

There will never be a truly perfect relationship between cars and bikes – accidents happen even in homogenous traffic environments. However, if the general population would “stop seeing bicyclists as obstacles,” but as people just trying to get to point B, Sanford says, that would be a significant step towards reducing injuries and deaths.

[Iris Dimmick \(http://irisdimnick.wordpress.com/\)](http://irisdimnick.wordpress.com/) is managing editor of the Rivard Report. Follow her on Twitter [@viviris](https://twitter.com/viviris) or contact her at iris@rivardreport.com.

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- Theodore Roosevelt

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