

Should California Do More To Reduce Bicycle Accidents?

With 130 bicycle accident deaths and more than 11,000 bicycle accident injuries each year, bicycle safety is a serious issue in California. And bicycle use is only growing, as residents begin to bike as a healthier, greener way to commute, and enjoy the state's beautiful setting. In fact, on the League of American Bicyclists' fourth annual list of major American cities, both San Francisco and Oakland climbed the ranks, placing 4th and 5th respectively. The boost was based on a double-digit jump in ridership over the past year alone. San Francisco boasts 10 percent more cyclists than last year, and Oakland's ridership increased 18 percent.

While this is great for both cities, it is problematic for bicycle safety if city and state governments do not respond by adding more bicycle lanes and vehicle passing laws to benefit cyclists. In the past, bicycle laws have favored vehicles as the king of the road. Though killing a cyclist once carried criminal charges, such cases were sent to civil courts once the state's cyclists began to increase in the 1970s. "Then, in exchange for waiving the right to due process, and to unclog the courts, the trade off was those cases would be handled in civil court," David Hiller of Washington State's Cascade Bicycle Club told *Bicycle Times*.

Currently, only nine states carry criminal penalties for bike-car accidents: Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, and Utah. California is noticeably absent. But in recent months, the state's lawmakers have indicated their intention to get serious about bicycle safety. Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa called for a statewide helmet law for all ages at an August "bike summit." And LA City Councilmember Bill Rosendahl has suggested implementing a three foot passing law.

Currently, California's bicycle laws require helmets for bicycle riders under the age of 17 and enforce strong cycling under the influence laws. But cyclists continue to fault the state for its lax bike-car accident laws, and some families of killed cyclists have said the city of San Francisco does not take bike memorials seriously enough.

California's budding commitment to bicycle and pedestrian plans is more encouraging. The state's transit agency, Caltrans, announced recently that it will put \$50 million toward Federal Highway Administration funds toward bicycle paths statewide. In addition, the cities of San Francisco, San Jose, and Palo Alto have announced the nation's first regional bike-share program.

While these projects will surely boost bicycle safety, the state must continue to take the issue seriously and understand that any bicycle or pedestrian death is unacceptable. We will continue following California's bicycle safety progress on the GJEL news center and blog.

More information:

<http://www.gjel.com/blog/california-lawmakers-get-serious-about-bike-safety.html>

<http://www.gjel.com/blog/are-californias-bike-car-accident-laws-too-lax.html>

<http://www.gjel.com/blog/california-must-improve-bicycle-safety-and-lanes-for-bike-share-program.html>

<http://www.gjel.com/blog/recent-bike-accidents-show-need-for-stronger-laws-protecting-cyclists.html>