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WALKING SAFETY

Don't Leave Pedestrians Out Of Infrastructure Equation

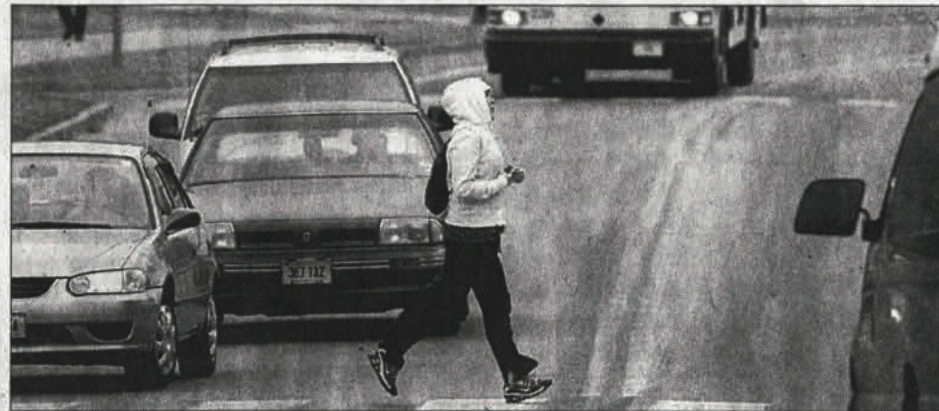
By **MIKE OWEN BENEDIKTSSON**
and **KATE SLEVIN**

As the economic crisis deepens, transportation infrastructure has taken center stage in fiscal debates at all levels of government. The focus has been on highways, bridges and transit. We should also be talking about places for people to walk. Pedestrian improvements, too often overlooked, should be part of the discussion.

It is no secret that regional planners have had a full-blown love affair with the automobile for the past century. The fruits of this union can be seen on all sides, in the form of air pollution, clogged streets and underfunded transit systems. But arguably the highest cost of living in a car-loving nation — serious risk to life and limb — tends to escape notice.

Two recent reports published by the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, a regional policy watchdog organization, offer a detailed analysis of pedestrian safety throughout the Connecticut/New York/New Jersey area. The reports, based on federal traffic fatality data, hint at some surprising and disturbing observations about life and death on local streets.

Perhaps most startling is the scale of pedestrian deaths. Nearly 1,500 pedestrians were killed in downstate New York, Connecticut and New Jersey in the past three years — a higher toll than that from asthma. Also unexpected is where pedestrian fatalities occur: According to the Tri-State Campaign reports, six of the 10 deadliest roads in the region are located not in cities, but in suburban counties. In Connecticut, suburban sections of U.S. Route



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THE CROSSWALK on North Eagleville Road in front of the chemistry building at UConn in Storrs is a particularly busy intersection. More visible signage has since been added to the crossing.

1 topped the list.

For those who equate dangerous intersections with congested urban streets, it may be surprising that suburban roads top the list. But perhaps this should not come as such a shock. In suburban areas designed for motorized transport, the automobile appears to be losing its luster. The result is growing ranks of pedestrians who lack the crosswalks they need.

A report released in December by the New York City Department of Transportation indicated that motor vehicle traffic in and around the city leveled off five years ago. A similar transition appears to be occurring in outer suburbs, where the census shows a 24 percent increase in the number of public transit riders and a 53 percent increase in walking commuters during the same period.

It is no accident that these changes have

occurred during a steady rise in gas prices.

When fuel costs escalate, many people choose to burn shoe leather rather than gasoline. Others turn to public transit, increasing foot traffic around bus stops and train stations.

A faltering economy exacerbates the effects of gas prices. In 2002, during the last economic downturn, walking to work increased throughout the region, and pedestrian fatalities spiked 12 percent. Plummeting automobile sales provoked by the current crisis suggest sharply higher levels of pedestrian danger.

Who suffers the most under the present state of affairs? It appears that seniors are far more likely to be killed. Approximately 12 percent of the tri-state area population consists of people age 65 and over, but they account for nearly 30 percent of pedestrian deaths. Seniors are more likely to walk, and suffer the most when lights

are poorly timed or crosswalks are lacking.

Given the severity of the problem, it is surprising that pedestrian deaths rarely spark public outrage. The reason appears to be simple resignation. There is a vague sense that dangerous street crossings are inevitable — just another cost of doing business (and life) in the modern megalopolis.

Increasingly, suburban politicians are rejecting the Faustian bargain struck by the region's planners, opening their minds and their pocketbooks to the pressing need for safer roads. Mayor John DeStefano of New Haven recently made pedestrian safety a centerpiece of his plan to revamp city streets, recognizing a growing need for planners to be "attentive and respectful to everyone using the roadway." In New York City, planners are working to make city streets more inviting for pedestrians via public plazas and more balanced roadways.

In New Jersey, a statewide pedestrian safety initiative, begun two years ago, may be starting to pay off. And in December, New York state announced an initiative to increase pedestrian safety for seniors in Long Island, citing the Tri-State Campaign's most recent report.

These are welcome moves. If the risk to street crossers is not seen as inevitable, then safety improvements quickly emerge as an imperative. Other transportation departments, including Connecticut's, should follow these examples in light of an increasingly apparent fact: When economic growth returns to the tri-state area, it is likely to arrive on foot.

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