

## **Cyclist Endangerment on Westwood Blvd II: A Response to Critics and Skeptics**

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Westwood Blvd has been designated a backbone of the LA 2010 Bike Plan and targeted for the extension of now segmented bike lanes. The leadership of the Westwood South of Santa Monica Homeowners' Association has opposed bike lanes for the stretch of Westwood Blvd that runs through the WSSM neighborhood between Santa Monica and Pico. The case in favor of bike lanes rests on a desire to mitigate the dangers that now confront cyclists on Westwood Blvd. I presented analysis of the safety issues (along with a design proposal for bike lanes and a discussion of the parking situation) in a previous report submitted to the WSSM Bike Committee, hereafter referred to as "Cyclist Endangerment I".<sup>1</sup> The report generated much discussion and criticism. This follow-up report offers a response to points raised by critics and skeptics.

Both reports are motivated by a desire to help inform stakeholders as to just how dangerous cycling is along the WSSM stretch of Westwood Blvd and to encourage the WSSM HOA leadership to reach out to HOA members with information on the situation.

This report begins with a recap of highlights from the WSSM HOA's history related to bike lanes. It then takes up a number of topics that have proven controversial in an effort to bring greater clarity to the discussion. Finally, it concludes with a safety based argument in favor of bike lanes for Westwood Blvd.

### **WSSM HOA Bike Lane Activity**

In recognition of the complexity of the bike lane issue, the WSSM HOA formed a Bike Committee which held a series of meetings. Committee members, as appointed by the President, are: Margaret Healey (co-chair); Craig Rich (co-chair); Marilyn Cohon; Randy Garrou; Janet Garstang; and Calla Wiemer.

A timeline of main activities is as follows:

- 5 March 2013    WSSM Board discusses Bike Committee formation
- 22 April 2013    first meeting of the Committee
- 15 May 2013    Wiemer's "Cyclist Endangerment I" submitted to the Committee
- 9 July 2013    last meeting of the Committee (to date)

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<sup>\*</sup>The author is a member of the Bike Committee of the Westwood South of Santa Monica Homeowners' Association. This is a revised version of a report submitted to the WSSM Board of Directors at its 5 November 2013 meeting. It reflects the views of the author alone and is not a product of the WSSM Bike Committee. It can be found online at [www.callawiemer.com/Documents/BikeWestwoodII.pdf](http://www.callawiemer.com/Documents/BikeWestwoodII.pdf).

<sup>1</sup>The full title is "Cyclist Endangerment on Westwood Blvd ... and How to Mitigate It". The report is posted online at [www.callawiemer.com/Documents/BikeWestwood.pdf](http://www.callawiemer.com/Documents/BikeWestwood.pdf).

Other than my “Cyclist Endangerment I”, no written documents have been prepared by members of the WSSM Bike Committee.

The WSSM leadership has disseminated a number of e-mail communications expressing opposition to bike lanes for Westwood Blvd. The most recent communication on this subject, dated 15 October 2013, objected even to the LA Department of Transportation undertaking study of a design proposal for bike lanes. The only mention of safety in this communication appeared in the statement: “The safety of pedestrians, cyclists and drivers is a critical goal.”

## Discussion of Cyclist Endangerment on Westwood Blvd

My further input on five aspects of the safety discussion follows.

1) **Safety of cyclists the focus.** The WSSM e-mail of 15 October 2013 lumps together the safety of pedestrians, cyclists, and drivers. Drivers are encased in steel and glass, and further protected by air bags that inflate on impact. Their safety is not at serious risk at speeds characteristic of Westwood Blvd. Cyclists and pedestrians, by contrast, are exposed bodily in spaces shared with motor vehicles. Bike lanes have been proposed to address the problem of danger to cyclists specifically. The three-year period 2009-2011 saw 12 reported collisions involving cyclists on the WSSM stretch of Westwood Blvd and none involving pedestrians.<sup>2</sup> By absorbing cyclists into the broader grouping of “pedestrians, cyclists and drivers” the critical problem faced by cyclists is diluted. ***The dangers faced by cyclists call for specific attention in connection with the debate on bike lanes.***

2) **Significance of cyclist collision data.** “Cyclist Endangerment I” reported data on the number of collisions involving cyclists by year for the WSSM stretch of Westwood Blvd. In 2011, six collisions resulted in police reports for this six block stretch of roadway. A WSSM Board member responded to this information as follows (8 Oct 2013, e-mail):

“I personally think the raw number isn't very meaningful. Some may see it as low, some may see it as high. I don't think there's enough context to interpret the value ...”

Let us develop the context.

- One way to provide context is to compare the rate of cyclist-involved collisions per mile for the WSSM stretch of Westwood Blvd with the rate for a broader geography. At six collisions in 0.8 miles, the per mile rate was 7.5 for WSSM Westwood. For the county of Los Angeles in the same year, the number of collisions involving cyclists was 2219. The number of non-freeway road miles in LA County is 20,245.<sup>3</sup> That makes for a cyclist-involved collision rate countywide of 0.24 per mile. ***Thus the per mile rate of cyclist-involved collisions for the WSSM stretch of Westwood Blvd in 2011 was nearly 32 times that exhibited on LA County roads in general.***

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<sup>2</sup> All collision data are from the Transportation Injury Mapping System (TIMS) of the University of California Berkeley, <http://tims.berkeley.edu/page.php?page=tools>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.laalmanac.com/transport/tr01.htm>

- Another way of providing context is to examine the ratio of cyclist-involved collisions relative to all collisions for Westwood Blvd versus the same ratio for the county overall. Conceivably, Westwood Blvd is so congested and treacherous that collision rates are high for all modes of transport, with cyclists just getting caught up in that broader milieu. As it turns out, however, for WSSM Westwood, 43 percent of all collisions in 2011 involved cyclists while for LA County as a whole the ratio was only 9.0 percent. ***This means collisions involving cyclists as a share of total collisions were 4.7 times higher for the WSSM stretch of Westwood Blvd than for LA County generally.***

Skeptics might still counter that the six collisions in 2011 were a statistical aberration. Such a short stretch of roadway is subject to a high degree of variability in collision rates from year to year, after all. But even if we take the average number of cyclist collisions over the three year period 2009-2011 to represent the statistically expected number of collisions in 2011, the count still comes to four. On a per mile basis, that number yields cyclist collisions for the WSSM stretch of Westwood Blvd at a rate 21 times higher than for LA County as a whole and a share of cyclist collisions relative to all collisions at a rate 3.2 times higher.

Bottom line, it is hard to imagine a standard by which six collisions involving cyclists (or even four) in six blocks in one year may be seen as low.

3) **Impact of bike lanes on safety.** The above statement from the WSSM Board member continues:

“... nor is it clear what will happen to that value in the future should the lane proposal succeed or fail.”

A 2012 academic study is instructive in this regard.<sup>4</sup> The authors estimate the likelihood of cyclist injury associated with different infrastructure configurations using an inventive methodology to control for cyclist and environmental characteristics. The most dangerous configuration for cyclists is identified as “major street with parked cars and no bike infrastructure”. Other configurations are benchmarked against this standard. The risk measure for cyclist injury was found to be lower by nearly 50 percent for “major streets with parked cars and bike lanes”. Although interpretation of the statistical results is complicated,<sup>5</sup> the authors were heartened to discover that their results conformed closely with cyclist perceptions of the relative dangers of different infrastructure configurations.

Ultimately, if bike lanes are installed on Westwood Blvd, there will be no way of knowing just how much bloodshed is avoided. Nor can we know exactly how many people will take to riding bikes on Westwood Blvd who would otherwise have been deterred. But as Teschke and co-authors ascertained, ***danger is palpable when you're in it on a bike. Anyone who is out riding Westwood Blvd regularly can attest to how scary it is and to the difference bike lanes would make.***

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<sup>4</sup> Kay Teschke, et al, “Route Infrastructure and the Risk of Injuries to Bicyclists: A Case-Crossover Study”, *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 102, No. 12 (December 2012).

<sup>5</sup> The reduction in the risk measure does not translate directly into an equivalent reduction in the probability of cyclist injuries, and the study does not present results in such a form. The statistical significance of the results is sensitive to the confidence interval chosen. Stronger significance in risk reduction is associated with a road configuration involving bike lanes and no parked cars than with bike lanes and the existence of parked cars.

Among the six cyclists involved in collisions on WSSM Westwood in 2011, five were male, only one female. This is consistent with gender proportions tabulated by the LA County Bicycle Coalition in its biennial counts of cyclists on LA roadways. LACBC analysis of the data has revealed, however, that when bike lanes are present the share of female riders more than doubles.<sup>6</sup> The interpretation offered is that females are typically more risk averse in their cycling choices than males, and that given safer conditions they are prepared to take advantage of the opportunities. The upshot is that ***installing bike lanes on Westwood Blvd would make it a more inclusive biking environment for women.***

4) **Complaints about cyclist behavior.** My reporting of collision figures at the June WSSM board meeting met with outcries over the perceived recklessness of cyclists. There may be many reasons why cyclists do not consistently adhere to rules of the road as designed for motor vehicles: attempt to avoid conflict; laziness; haste; capability to maneuver in ways that cars cannot. There may also be many reasons why motorists violate the right-of-way of cyclists: distraction; haste; didn't "see" cyclist; "couldn't help it". Fault is to be found on both sides. ***Solutions are nevertheless more likely to be achieved through creating safer spaces for cyclists and motorists to coexist than through changing human nature.***

For the six cyclist-involved collisions reported on WSSM Westwood in 2011, case reports show the motorist at fault in four and no party assigned fault in the other two. In all six cases, the cyclist was injured while the motorist escaped unharmed. To state the obvious, ***the contest between cyclists and cars is highly unequal.***

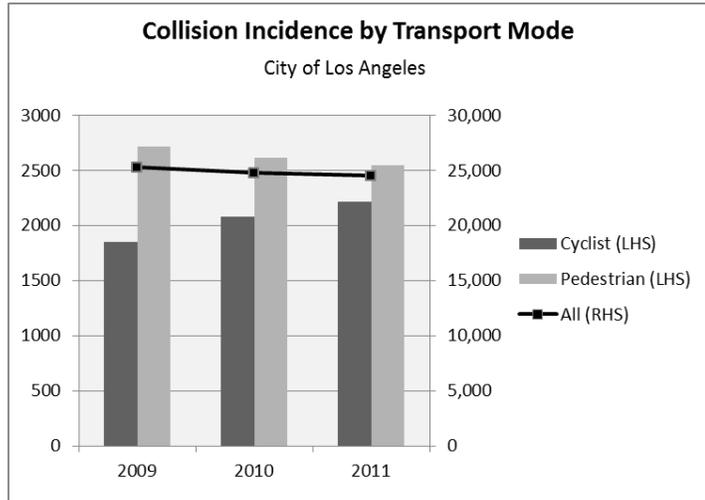
5) **Collisions involving cyclists on an upswing.** Collisions involving cyclists have trended sharply upward in Los Angeles since the mid-2000s. Between 2007 and 2011, the number rose citywide by nearly 70 percent. Westwood Blvd has similarly seen a dramatic increase from only two cyclist-involved collisions between 2002 and 2007 to 15 between 2008 and 2011. For the period since 2011, we do not yet have full collision data but we do have numbers on cyclist fatalities culled from news accounts, and these show an alarming leap. The number of cyclist fatalities in LA County for all of 2012 was 22; for the first ten months of 2013 the count had already reached 32.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition, "Results from the 2011 City of Los Angeles Bicycle and Pedestrian Count," p. 21, [https://lacbc.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/2011\\_labikecountreport.pdf](https://lacbc.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/2011_labikecountreport.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Ted Rogers, BikingInLa, <http://bikinginla.wordpress.com/2013/10/30/young-bike-rider-killed-in-santa-clarita-collision-witnesses-say-salmon-cyclist-ran-red-light/>.

By contrast the incidence of collisions of all types has been declining, as has that for collisions involving pedestrians, as the accompanying figure shows. A major factor in the increase in cyclist-involved collisions is presumably an increase in the number of cyclists on the road. The LACBC bike counts show ridership trending strongly upward for Los Angeles generally. ***A pattern of ever more cyclists on the road incurring ever more injuries is at the heart of the case for better cycling infrastructure.***



## Assessment

Current conditions on Westwood Blvd are extremely dangerous for cyclists. This is a problem for two reasons. One is that cyclists now braving these dangers are being injured in significant numbers. The other is that people who would like to travel the corridor by bike are afraid to do so.

Westwood Blvd would present a very different atmosphere if bike lanes were installed and people in numbers gave up their cars to cycle. For those getting around by bike, local shopping and dining would be more convenient without the stress of having to park a car. No time would be wasted in transit as the time spent would double as exercise. But even those traveling by car would be better off if freed of the frustration of getting trapped behind slow moving cyclists. Cars and bikes would have their own spaces to move at their own speeds.

The problem of cyclists impeding motorists will only get worse with the opening of the Westwood Blvd Expo Line station. This station will not offer parking for cars. Cyclists and pedestrians will be its mainstay. Many who now drive to UCLA or Westwood Village will find the combination of rail and bike an attractive alternative. We need to prepare for this.

The decision whether to install bike lanes on Westwood Blvd, or even to study proposed designs, will be made by District 5 Councilmember Paul Koretz. In reaching a verdict, he will take into account input from neighborhood stakeholders. As a community, we must hope that the input he receives is well informed.