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Michael Gorman: WGLT Sound Ideas Interview November 23, 2015

Jim Browne: Michael Gorman is also the treasurer for Bike BloNo. He, along with Mike Bernenko and Kurtis Wang, conducted an analysis of collisions between cyclists and drivers. A recent situation involved what was an apparent case of road rage against cyclists, but that's an anomaly according to the report. How did you compile the data for this report?

Michael Gorman: So the first step in compiling this report is filing four-year requests with the City of Bloomington, Town of Normal, and McLean County Sheriff's Department.

Browne: Did you have to file a Freedom of Information Act request for each accident that you wanted to look at?

Gorman: Not for each individual accident or crash as we call them actually. So the word "accident" has some implications that say there's lack of intent or that it couldn't really be prevented. Whereas we're saying with this report that all crashes can be prevented if you know what you're looking for and what to do about them. We went to each of the police departments in the sheriff's department and asked for all of the crash reports between cyclists and car drivers.

Browne: During what time period?

Gorman: It was an 18-month period from 2014 through the end of June 2015. We also included one crash that happened in July of 2015.

Browne: Why was that included?

Gorman: That was the crash between local cyclist Dean Davis and a former assistant superintendent of schools in rural McLean County. It was actually the trigger for this report. This driver came up on a group of cyclists who were riding time trials.

Browne: Now these take place on the surrounding two-lane blacktops?

Gorman: Yes, they're up— I think they start up around Comlara by Lake Evergreen.

Browne: What made this particular crash stand out?

Gorman: The driver came up upon the group of cyclists and he started individually intimidating each cyclist as he approached them. So he would ride up really close next to them and then go in front of them and then slam on his breaks repeatedly as he approached. The last one he did it to was Dean Davis and Dean was run off the road into the ditch by the side of the road and he ended up going to BroMenn for several very severe injuries.

Browne: Now this is a bicyclist's nightmare when something like this happens because you're completely helpless.

Gorman: Yeah there's nothing a cyclist can do in that instance, other than ride off the road.

Browne: Now that's out of the ordinary accident.

Gorman: It is.

Browne: But it is the one that is the impetus for this study.

Gorman: Exactly. A lot of people were really motivated to find out what kinds of crashes are happening in this community and how we can prevent them.

Browne: What is the most common scenario?

Gorman: One of the most dangerous places that a cyclist can be riding safely and legally and doing everything they should be doing is right in front of a left turning vehicle. Because when someone is trying to turn left in their car, they're looking where they expect someone to be driving and potentially colliding with them. And when you're a cyclist, you're riding at a different speed than a car would be, potentially riding in a different places if there is a side path, for instance. You know, you see the Constitution Trail on the north side of G. E. Road, for instance, and those intersections can be dangerous places for people on bikes.

Browne: What other scenarios are we seeing?

Gorman: The most common crashes in McLean County are when a cyclist is on a sidewalk and they come to an intersection or a driveway crossing or other places where cars and bikes are legally supposed to be in the same place. The problem is when you're riding on the sidewalk you need to behave like a pedestrian, you need to ride at the same speed a pedestrian would walk, you need to stop and look both ways before crossing intersections because really cars aren't looking for you in those places. They're looking for other people on the street, they wouldn't be looking for you on the sidewalk.

Browne: It's especially hazardous if you're on a sidewalk alone on a one-way street and you're riding against the flow of traffic because the motorists are all looking to the North or whatever and you're coming out of the south and bang!

Gorman: You really don't want to ride against the flow of traffic ever.

Browne: How effective is the 3-foot rule?

Gorman: The 3-foot rule is not often applied in McLean County or really nationally. The problem is enforcement, right? It's very difficult for a police officer to see that it was less than 3 feet between the car and the bike.

Browne: And you targeted one particular situation in your report where an officer had decided to write a citation not because of the violation of the 3-foot rule, but for another reason because it wasn't like he was trying to dodge his duty or anything, it was just a lot simpler.

Gorman: Sure. There are many things that can be charged against a driver that hits a cyclist. If the law enforcement community were charging people with the 3-foot rule more often, it might lead to better safety on bikes. And in other communities, police officers are actually riding on bikes with radar devices on their bikes that show the officer in real time how much space there is between them and the car, which could make it easier for police officers to charge people with the 3-foot rule more often.

Browne: What about Veterans Parkway in Bloomington? Do we have a lot of vehicle-bicycle crashes around Veterans Parkway?

Gorman: We do. Veterans Parkway crossings are some of the most dangerous places for people on bikes and unfortunately, it's sort of a wall in our community. It's very difficult—

Browne: I've heard it being called a "moat".

Gorman: —Yeah, yeah! A moat is a very good way to describe it. There is one trail crossing across Veterans Parkway up by Vernon and G.E. Road in Normal and south of that, there isn't really any safe way for a person on a bike to cross Veterans.

Browne: Lincoln Street is not too bad, you can cross—

Gorman: Lincoln Street is not terrible, but I actually rode across Lincoln on Veterans a few nights ago. I was the only person crossing Veterans, I started as soon as the light turned green, by the time I went across it was already red. There isn't much time to cross Veterans there. So I know a lot of people—

Browne: And you're a cyclist who gets out once or twice a day to bicycle.

Gorman: Absolutely. I mean yeah, I do ride a lot, it's my primary mode of transportation around town, so it says something that I don't have enough time to cross Veterans on Lincoln, even when I'm not waiting behind a car or anything else. I know a lot of people choose to cross that intersection on the cross walk and they actually stop on the median and wait two full cycles to get across.

Browne: Stay off of sidewalks or if you're going to ride on sidewalks, be extra vigilant of your surroundings. Look out for those left turn situations, don't be riding back and forth across

Veterans Parkway anymore than you have to. Those are the dangerous places, when are the dangerous times for a bicyclist?

Gorman: It's hard to say when the most dangerous times are. We know when the most crashes happen, but we...

Browne: But that doesn't necessarily mean that's the most dangerous time to be on a bicycle, right?

Gorman: ...Correct because that could just mean that's the time most people are out on their bikes, so that's when the most crashes happen. The most crashes happen in the mid-afternoon kind of time period, 3 o'clock, 4 o'clock, 5 o'clock—

Browne: About the time there are more cars on the street than any other time.

Gorman: Absolutely, yeah. So that's when the most crashes happen, we can't say definitively that's the most dangerous time.

Browne: Do we have any information on the closing times statistics at around 1 o'clock in the morning to about 3 o'clock in the morning?

Gorman: We don't have a ton of crashes in the community, which is a good thing. What we do know is that there was one crash in the 2 o'clock hour, one crash in the 5 o'clock hour, and other than that, the midnight kind of period pretty light on crashes, which is good.

Browne: But could it also simply be a reflection that there are fewer vehicles and bicycles on the road at that time?

Gorman: Exactly.

Browne: What is the outcome of this whole study, Michael?

Gorman: One of the things we really learned from this study is that the vast majority of the crashes that are happening are people on very cheap bikes, Walmart-type bikes. And what we know from that is that the people who really need their bike to get around town, that they're riding their bike for transportation, not for recreation.

Browne: These are commuter bicyclists.

Gorman: Exactly. So one takeaway from that is we really need to reach out to those types of cyclists to try to educate them about safety and how to prevent these sorts of crashes in the future.

Browne: So start handing out pamphlets at the bicycle racks at Walmart?

Gorman: Absolutely that would be a great place to start.

Browne: Really!?

Gorman: We would like to build up relationships with those retailers and see if we can provide safety information at the point of purchase. Also working with employers in the community. There are people delivering goods and services by bike, employers who know that they have a lot of cyclists who commute to work that way, reaching out to them and seeing if we could offer a 15 minute training session. Those sorts of opportunities would really be key to decreasing the number of crashes, as well as educating drivers because we know we're never gonna reach every cyclist, we're never gonna reach every driver, but we can say partner with driver's ed instructors or through outlets like this where we're talking to people who do drive to make sure that they're paying attention to people on bikes.

Browne: But I get so darn mad at those bicyclists.

Gorman: Absolutely, even me when I'm driving. I am in this sort of mindset where I want to get to where I'm going as quickly as possible and speed and safety don't necessarily go hand in hand all the time. So as I'm driving I just need to remember to myself that everyone else who is going somewhere, they don't want to be on the road necessarily, they're just trying to get where they're going and adding that little bit of empathy really makes me feel, okay I can slow down a little bit if I need to.

Browne: Michael Gorman, treasurer of Bike BloNo and co-author of the collision study. The study does have one other finding of interest: Tuesday is the most dangerous day to be out on a bicycle, followed closely by Wednesday, the other five days of the week far behind. I'm Jim Browne, WGLT News.