



THE TAOS NEWS

Best U.S. Weekly Paper- NNA 2007, 2008, 2010
Inland Press Nation's Best Weekly Newspaper 2009

Riding on the edge

Safer roads may lie ahead for Taos bicyclists (and runners)

By John Miller

For The Taos News, 8/18/2106

Paul Richard has been biking along the same stretch of Paseo del Pueblo Norte for the past six years. It's a route he admires for its sweeping views of Taos Pueblo pastureland and far-off Taos Mountain. But every time he merges onto the narrow shoulder that hugs the highway's busy southbound lane, he is reminded that in Taos, his favorite pastime is not without risks.

"Is it safe to ride out here?"

Well, there are places in Taos where it's fairly safe, but not here," said Richard after stopping to rest on the dusty turnout for Atilano Road. As he spoke, a heavy stream of morning traffic whipped behind him at high speeds. "I'm only on here for a bit before I get off at Upper Ranchitos Road. So far, I haven't had any problems."

Safety concerns

Others haven't been so lucky. An Aug. 11 report from the Taos Police Department documents four incidents so far this year in which bicyclists or pedestrians were struck by vehicles. Two of those collisions occurred along Paseo del Pueblo Sur, where pedestrians were struck by oncoming traffic. The other two incidents took place on side streets – Los Pandos Road and Kit Carson Road – where bicyclists were clipped and thrown by drivers who had wandered onto shoulder lanes.

While those numbers might not indicate that running or biking in Taos is inherently dangerous, it doesn't take into account the many close calls and unreported incidents that occur each year due to poor road conditions — and the prevailing fear that many local bikers and runners carry with them every time they hit those roads.

"From eighth grade to junior year of high school, I biked from my house out by UNM[Taos] to go to school and soccer practice," said Katie Emery, who plays soccer for Vassar College and spends her summers working at Gearing Up Bicycle Shop, which is located at 616 Paseo del Pueblo Sur.

"Biking in this town is terrifying. I never had an accident, but my boyfriend got hit last spring and went over his handlebars."

Taos is known for its natural beauty and as a draw for athletes. But many people still find that the path to local, outdoor recreation is paved with potholes, narrow and gravel-strewn bike lanes, out-of-sync stoplights and drivers who seem to have a low willingness to safely share the road with bicyclists and others.

It's not a new issue, but it's one that seems to only punctuate the deeper problem: Why has so little been done to make Taos' roadways safer?

Push for progress

Before continuing his morning ride, Richard explained that the Taos biking and running community seems to be divided into two groups on the issue. There is the group that has pushed for road reform for years and one that says riders just need to be aware of the risks and stop complaining about it.

But for those who recognize that their community is comprised of both seasoned triathletes and those who are less experienced — including children — ignoring the issue isn't an option.

Louis Fineberg, director of planning, community and economic development for the town of Taos, has been fielding questions and complaints regarding road safety for years.

He said that Taos might finally be making moves toward building a safer infrastructure.

"Being a biker myself, I know that there are a lot of hazards," he said. "There's no question about it — it's an older road system, especially in the historic district. Right now, the town is working with the Trust for Public Land to put together what they're calling the 'Green Printing Project,' which is looking to create more open space, trails and bike lanes. The goal is to create a plan that prioritizes where bike lanes should go and what new trails should be built."

About a year ago, Gov. Susana Martinez visited Taos to tout that the New Mexico Department of Transportation would be allocating \$11.3 million to fix roughly 4 miles of Taos' main thoroughfare. Various plans have been presented in the ensuing months, including repaving and widening roads, coordinating traffic signals, embellishing downtown with "historic-themed lighting" and, yes, adding proper bike lanes.

But after several public forums raised concerns among business owners and residents, progress seems to have stalled.

"I'm not honestly sure even when they're going to start," Fineberg said. "I've heard that they're modifying the scope of the project. At first, it was going to be intersection improvements, as well as a lot of other things — and the last I heard, it was going to be just repaving.

I'm not entirely sure what was the cause of that revision."

Gear shift

Carl Colonius, a community development consultant, has been engaged in the Green Printing Project since discussions first began and is now working to establish an organization that will serve as a watchdog entity to ensure follow-through on public improvement projects.

"My particular focus right now as a consultant is on the establishment of an implementation mechanism," Colonius said. "With all of this planning going on, we will have a master plan, so I want to make sure that it actually gets done. I'm helping to coordinate the development of a trail association that would relate with local government, federal land management agencies and user groups to be a focal point that gathers resources and convenes groups in and around trail development and maintenance."

Colonius is set to present his plan, which he is calling "The Enchanted Circle Trail Association," to 50 elected officials, recreational planners, trail users, decision makers and stakeholders on Aug. 26.

His hope is that the new private-public partnership will be able to facilitate existing projects, identify new ones and present their value to the public and then efficiently execute project objectives. Colonius added that working with the NMDOT on completing the proposed

thoroughfare renovation is an opportunity to enhance safety for the many runners and bikers who call Taos home.

While taxpayers wait to see how the project plays out in the coming months, Taos Police Department Sgt. David Trujillo urges bicyclists and runners to use good judgment, ride defensively and in groups, wear bright clothing and know not to travel dangerous roads until they see needed improvement.



Robert Martinez rides his bike on the sidewalk of Paseo del Pueblo Sur Aug. 11, 2015.



A cyclist rides south on Gusdorf Road Aug. 11, 2015.

Copyright (c)2016 The Taos News 8/18/2016

Powered by TECNAVIA