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Bicycling Safety in Tampa and Hillsborough County A Statement from the League of American Bicyclists By Andy Clarke, LAB President

The tragic deaths of six area bicyclists in recent weeks is an awful reminder of the terrible toll – and excruciating personal loss – caused by traffic crashes in the Tampa area. Our hearts go out to the families and friends of the victims and to all those touched by these fatalities. There is nothing we can do to bring these loved ones back.

Perhaps the best we can hope for is that their deaths serve as a wake-up call to the community: a clarion call to the cowardly hit-and-run drivers and red-light runners who show such disdain for human life; a clarion call to the Mayor, city council, and county commissioners striving to create safe, livable communities; and a clarion call to every bicyclist, pedestrian and driver on area roads. Please – take care, pay attention, and show some respect for each other.

Part of the tragedy unfolding in Tampa is the fact that crashes like this are generally [on the decline](#) nationwide, even as [more and more people](#) in cities across the country get back on their bikes and enjoy the healthy benefits of active transportation. [One out of every six](#) bicyclists killed in the United States each year loses their life on Florida roadways; the recent spate of fatalities in Tampa alone is one percent of the annual national total.

Our plea to the elected leaders of and the entire Tampa Bay community is that you decide today that this is unacceptable and must stop. The way communities react to tragedies such as this truly defines their commitment to bicyclist safety and to their “bicycle-friendliness”. Three years ago, the leading bicycling city of Portland, Ore., suffered two bicyclist deaths just a couple of weeks apart. The immediate response of Mayor Sam Adams in pulling together the law enforcement, traffic engineering, public safety, and bicycling communities to coordinate a [powerful and effective response](#) clearly demonstrated their true commitment to ensuring their city streets are safe for bicycling. Nothing short of that will suitably honor the lives of these Tampa cyclists.

Our plea to the residents of Tampa, especially those behind the wheel of a motor vehicle, is to stop treating cyclists like animals. The callous disregard for human life shown by the driver who won't even stop when they hit someone is inexcusable; as is the level of vitriol towards cyclists on display in the on-line newspaper comments that follow every such incident. We understand that many cyclists flout the rules of the road and that such behavior is irritating – the organized bicycling community, including the League, tries hard to change that dynamic through our [education](#) and [club](#) programs. But not only are the recent deaths NOTHING to do with cyclist misbehavior, the last victim was on the sidewalk when they were hit by a car involved in a red-light running crash.

As this last fatal crash highlights, traffic safety in Tampa is really not about bicyclists, or bicyclists versus motorists. It is much bigger than that and deserves a much bigger response. The temptation to crack down on bicycling as somehow inherently unsafe must be resisted. People out riding and walking are the indicator species of a healthy, vibrant, safe and livable community.

Street design, community development, and driving behavior that discourage people from bicycling and walking should not be tolerated – not least because it makes everyone vulnerable and unsafe. Distracted, drunken and drugged driving is a scourge that affects every motorist as well as every cyclist and pedestrian. Speeding and red-light running, turning without slowing or stopping, failing to yield or signal will catch up with us all whether we are behind the wheel of a car or simply trying to get across the street. For the last several decades, more than [40,000 people a year](#) have been killed in traffic crashes in the United States – mostly car drivers and passengers. That simply wouldn't happen if we were all following the rules.

Our plea to the law enforcement community is to take these fatalities and crashes seriously. We understand that rarely does someone get into their car with the intent of causing harm, let alone death. The impact of killing someone must be devastating, and remarkably rarely do the families of the victims want revenge. They do want justice, and I believe they do expect the serious impact of a driver's careless, inattentive or dangerous disregard for the safety of others to be taken into account. There may be new laws that are required to adequately prosecute "[causing death by careless or dangerous driving](#)", so people take the everyday function of driving a little more seriously. By all means [crack down](#) on cyclist behavior that is a real threat to public safety or a common cause of bicycle-motor vehicle crashes, but please don't assume that a cyclist is in the wrong simply for [being on the road](#) in the first place. We really don't deserve that.

The Tampa area is blessed with [numerous](#) League Cycling Instructors, active bicycling clubs, bike shops and bike-related businesses that promote more and safer cycling. Our [bicycle-friendly community](#) program provides a roadmap for improvements. There are expert traffic engineers and planners who know how to design safer streets for ALL road users. There are examples across the country of where this is being done – even the formerly-mean streets of [New York City](#) are being transformed into [complete streets](#) that people can walk across, ride along, drive down, and park in safely and conveniently.

Even though the tools are there, that kind of transformation doesn't happen easily or overnight. We urge Tampa Bay area elected officials to work constructively with the local cycling community, traffic safety experts, law enforcement, public health, business leaders and local neighborhoods to make the tough decisions to usher in a new era of safer streets and more livable communities – not just for a bunch of bicyclists or for the grief-stricken families of fallen riders, but for the good of the entire community.