Arianna Long

Improving Pedestrian Safety–One Step at a Time

Nine pedestrian deaths in 2020. 15 pedestrian deaths in 2021. How many more will occur in 2022?

According to 13WMAZ, the National Complete Streets Coalition said that Macon-Bibb County has some of the state’s highest pedestrian fatalities.

Macon-Bibb County is made up of several boards to be of the interest to residents and their wellbeing. Of these boards, the Pedestrian Safety Review Board’s mission is to find ways to make all of the county’s roads, streets and alleys safe for pedestrians, according to their website.

Thomas Ellington, a professor of political science at Wesleyan College, as well as a community leader who has been involved in several projects such as Macon-Bibb County Land Bank Authority and Macon-Bibb County Transit Authority, explained why he joined the Pedestrian Safety Review Board as a member around 2015.

“There was basically some rhetoric about how, for the most part, there was always some kind of error on the pedestrian to cause their death. So somebody was drunk, or somebody was wearing dark clothing at night or somebody wasn't using a crosswalk,” Ellington said. “And it struck me that there are people who get drunk in other cities, wear dark clothing and don't use crosswalks, but they have a lower pedestrian death rate than we do. So something else is wrong.”

The Pedestrian Safety Review Board was first created in 2015 to improve pedestrian safety efforts, such as creating space for walking and bicycling to be more friendly and accessible in community development.

“What I'm convinced of at this point, is that we've [Macon-Bibb County] done a bad job of building infrastructure that takes all users into account. We spent decades building the transportation system,” Ellington said. “That's great for moving cars from point A to point B, but doesn't take into account any of the other users, whether it is bicyclists, pedestrians, people who are on mass transit. And so, you know, there's decades of mistakes to correct there to make this a safer place.”

According to their website, the Pedestrian and Safety Review Board has accomplished several goals including starting an education campaign to help encourage pedestrians to use crosswalks, hiring a consultant to help the county consider Vision Zero strategies to reduce traffic fatalities and improving data collection, and mapping of high collision, dangerous roadways and intersections.

Ellington helped secure a Department of Transportation (DOT) Grant to secure a Vision Zero Action Plan. This is a roadmap to get to zero traffic fatalities overall.

Ellington said, “I think that we haven't done a great job of urban planning in the past in a way that will take advantage of our existing infrastructure.”

Bike Walk Macon is a nonprofit organization that was started in 2015. Their mission is to make biking and walking throughout Macon a safe and convenient transportation and recreation.

Rachel Hollar Umana, Executive Director of Bike Walk Macon, said they have three strategies to achieve this goal.

“Our first strategy is advocacy. So we advocate from the state level to the federal level, for funding and policies and better street design that improves conditions for people who bike and walk. Our second strategy is education. So that is teaching people how to bike and walk on Macon streets and also educating drivers about how to be aware of people who use other forms of transportation in the streets,” Umana said. “And then our third strategy is community. So we host a lot of events and programs that just get people excited about biking and walking, and comfortable with it. And our goal through those events is making biking and walking more of a choice that people choose to take versus taking a car.”

Bike Walk Macon started as a group of volunteers. Umana was a bicycle commuter who traveled to work and noticed there were challenges on the way.

Umana said, “So back in 2015 when we started, we had less than a mile of bike lanes in Macon. And we also didn't have a lot of pedestrian accommodations around Macon. And just in the past seven years, we've seen Macon-Bibb county over time, as streets are getting repaved, they've started to include more than ever before, accommodations for people who are biking and for people who are walking.”

In June 2021, the organization worked closely with Macon-Bibb County to pass a “Complete Streets Policy.” This is an ordinance that says that any new road project has to consider all forms of transportation who are using that street. Only two cities in Georgia have this ordinance.

“If you look at the streets where pedestrians are getting killed, it’s on Eisenhower Parkway, Gray Highway, Mercer University, Pio Nono. It’s these big streets where they're not safe places for people across the road. They're also really wide streets where cars are going very, very fast,” Umana said. “And also crosswalks are about three fourths to a mile apart from each other. So a big contribution to why people are getting killed on our streets is because they haven't been designed for pedestrians to get around safely.”

The organization works with the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) to make the changes on the big roads where fatalities are being seen. These roads are overseen by GDOT, they are not controlled by the local Macon-Bibb County government.

Bike Walk Macon has free community events going on every month that are typically open to all ages and skill levels. There is also a monthly newsletter sent out that you can sign up for on their website. Since they are nonprofit, people have the opportunity to donate or become annual members to fund their missions and keep doing work.

You can visit their website at bikewalkmacon.com or social media pages @BikeWalkMacon.