

# Advocates cautiously optimistic about pedestrian, cycling safety gains in WMass

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Rebecca Willoughby, a resident of Independence House in Springfield, joins members of Walk/BikeSpringfield and WalkMassachusetts on a walking audit to check on pedestrian safety in the area of the Jordan Senior Center and Putnam High. From left are Betsy Johnson of Walk/Bike Springfield, Willoughby, Deborah Hunter of Walk/Bike Springfield and Brendan Kearney, co-executive director of WalkMassachusetts. They are crossing Roosevelt Avenue in September 2023. (Don Treeger / The Republican)

By [Staasi Heropoulos | Special to The Republican](#)

SPRINGFIELD — Jim Gurzenski spends a lot of time on his bicycle, pedaling from Longmeadow to Springfield where he does volunteer work, fixing bikes for low-income people who can't afford repairs.

The 68-year-old retired quality control manager is noticing that roads are becoming a bit safer, with new lanes designated for bicyclists.

"If there's a bike lane, it's pretty safe. If there's no bike lanes, it's kind of dicey," he told The Republican.

There is also a new state law mandating motorists give bikers four feet of clearance when they drive by. "I have noticed drivers are giving bikers extra room," said Gurzenski, who lives in Longmeadow.

The lanes and law appear to be working, based on limited evidence. Since last November, the number of bicyclists killed in motor vehicle crashes in Hampden County is zero, according to [WalkBike Springfield](#), a group advocating for safer roads.

The organization is gathering Sunday at Springfield Central Library, joining other groups at 1 p.m. to mark the annual [World Day of Remembrance](#) for road traffic victims. The event is held every November and honors people who have died in motor vehicle crashes.

## Fatality count

Since last November, 36 people have been killed on roads in Hampden County. More than 100 others were severely injured. They are pedestrians, motorcyclists, drivers and their passengers, according to WalkBike spokesperson Betsy Johnson.

"Solutions are just starting to be put in, but more needs to be done," she said. "Things are happening, yet we still have 36 fatalities — not as many pedestrians and no bicycle fatalities. The big losers this year were motorcyclists."

According to data provided to the [Massachusetts Department of Transportation](#) by local police departments, Johnson said eight pedestrians and 11 motorcyclists were killed in the last 12 months. There were 17 other fatalities including motor vehicle drivers and passengers. The city of Springfield had 19 road fatalities last year, the same number as Boston, a much larger city with many times the traffic. So far this year, there have been 13 deadly crashes in Springfield and 22 in Boston, according to the Massachusetts DOT.

Johnson has given Springfield failing grades for traffic safety in the past but is raising her rating to a C- this year.

"We're celebrating because, very belatedly, the city of Springfield is finally putting in a protected pedestrian crossing on State Street across from the library," she said. "Ten years ago, they said it couldn't be done. We need to bring down fatalities in the entire area, and particularly in Springfield, by taking significant steps to redesign our roadways."

Gurzenski, a member of WalkBike Springfield, said the group did a walking audit of Roosevelt Avenue last year and found serious safety problems.

"The biggest thing we saw was there wasn't enough time for a person to cross the street with traffic signals at crosswalks," he said.

Department of Public Works Director Chris Cignoli could not be reached for comment on the city's plans to improve traffic safety, although repaving and relining are being done on a long stretch of Parker Street. It's unclear what, if any, traffic improvements are being made as part of the project.

## Road to improvement

Johnson praised Chicopee, Holyoke, West Springfield and Longmeadow for making improvements that include raised pedestrian crosswalks that slow traffic, speed bumps and reconfiguring two lanes of traffic into one, which keeps vehicles from jockeying for position, along with reducing speed, she said.

"Those communities are all starting to implement a significant number of improvements," she said.

Public works officials in those municipalities either could not be reached or did not return calls for comment.

Much of the funding for the road work is coming from President Biden's bipartisan [infrastructure bill](#), which Congress passed in 2021. That was a great beginning, but more needs to be done, said Brendan Kearney, co-executive director of [WalkMassachusetts](#). "There needs to be increased action at the local level. Part of that is from our state legislators giving local communities tools they need, like more funding to be able to do infrastructure improvements," he said. "We want to see more action in the coming years to make our streets safer."

Kearney is concerned that because of limited funding, future road work will not include safety features he and others are recommending.

"Local elected officials and staff want their citizens to be safe, but if the money is not there to do it — there are so many other priorities, like just making sure the roads are paved. I'm hopeful, as we are thinking about repaving, we're not just putting back what's out there, but we're adding more crosswalks."

There were three traffic fatalities in Holyoke last year, along with eight in Chicopee, one in Northampton, two in Greenfield, one in Westfield and five in Pittsfield.