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RE Recent crash on NE 21st Ave highlights need for physical protection for bike lanes

Date September 12, 2023

To Commissioner Mingus Mapps, Millicent Williams, Clay Veka

Cc Jody Yates, Roger Geller, BikePortland

Dear Commissioner Mapps, Director Williams, and Ms. Veka,

As leaders responsible for Portland's transportation system, we know you want to keep people safe. On Thursday, August 31, a driver mowed down a row of flexible plastic wands "protecting" a bike lane and hit a woman head-on who was biking south on NE 21st Avenue over I-84. The rider was thrown from her bike into the air. She miraculously survived. The driver did not stop.

The bike lanes on this section of NE 21st are separated from head-on traffic only by plastic delineator wands. PBOT traffic engineers have made it clear that **"vertical delineation does not constitute a protected bike lane,"** yet these plastic flex-posts are everywhere in Portland. Look for them the next time you cross a bridge – battered by drivers, and often missing where they're most needed.

Portlanders who bike have warned for years of the danger. These were reactions [in 2016](#) to the then-new bike lanes on the 21st Avenue Bridge:

"Cars will cut over that paint and into [the] oncoming bike lane all the time."

"Of ... real concern is having a car cut the corner and have a head-on with a cyclist ... I do believe there needs to be some fixed yellow pillars ... to protect the route and prevent that from happening."

Their predictions were correct: PBOT maintenance records will show that the flex-posts on the NE 21st bridge have been repeatedly replaced, with every demolished post reflecting a driver crossing into the bike lanes.

Last week's crash on NE 21st was not an accident. It's only by chance that those previous driver errors didn't happen when a person was biking in the same space, and only by chance that this latest crash didn't become yet another traffic death.



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Portland Police report that they have apprehended the driver responsible for the crash. We don't know why the driver struck the cyclist. What we do know is that PBOT supports "Safe Systems" of forgiving streets as part of its Vision Zero program. The Portland Bureau of Transportation has committed to the premises that *death and serious injuries are unacceptable*; that *people make mistakes*; and that *redundancy is crucial*: "if one layer of protection fails, another will prevent serious injury." (PBOT, [Vision Zero's Safe System Approach](#).)

On NE 21st Avenue, as on many of our streets, PBOT continues to maintain a system with zero redundancy for those not in cars, where a momentary and predictable error by a driver injured a woman biking and could easily have taken her life.

We ask that the Portland Bureau of Transportation take this terrifying crash as a wake-up call to make the following changes:

1. Install metal bollards or other physical protection capable of stopping or deflecting a vehicle on the NE 21st and NE 28th Avenue bike lanes over I-84. Flex-posts are not appropriate in any place where two-way or contra-flow bike lanes expose cyclists to head-on vehicle traffic.
2. Track locations where plastic flex-posts show signs of frequent damage and upgrade them with physical barriers (e.g. curbs, bollards, concrete blocks). Continuing to use only plastic posts where we already know they will be run over puts our lives at risk.
3. Use physical protection rather than plastic delineators in new bike lane projects, especially at curbs, corners, or where the speed limit is greater than 20 miles per hour. It seems obvious, but all new bike projects must use protection that meets "Safe System" goals.

Thank you for all of the work you do to keep us safe while we are using Portland's transportation system. We appreciate that you care about our lives and hope you will reach out with any questions.

Sincerely,

BikeLoud PDX Board



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