



South End residents are asking the city for more warning signs and police enforcement. (George Rizer/ Globe Staff)

A walk on the wild side

Pedestrians and drivers often at odds in busy South End

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By Lisa Wangsness, Globe Staff | November 28, 2005

Boston hails itself the walking city, where everything is within strolling distance and pedestrians are known for their boldness. But it is also a place of such legendary motoring horrors that a guidebook warns "Boston drivers and their antics are inescapable."

In such a city, it is perhaps inevitable that walkers and drivers will clash. But in the South End -- a nexus of busy thoroughfares and leafy side streets teeming with residents and visitors attracted by trendy cafes and galleries -- it has become an all-out blitz.

With a surge in auto accidents this year, some neighborhood leaders are asking the city to plant warning signs in the middle of busy crosswalks, step up police enforcement, and conduct studies of the South End's three major avenues to pinpoint hot spots where the city should focus on improving traffic safety.

City officials are recalibrating crosswalk signals to give pedestrians more time to cross the street and installing devices that display the seconds left before the light will change. One restaurateur has suggested that business groups help pay for crosswalks that light up at night. Some residents have taken to putting up their own signs warning drivers to yield for pedestrians in crosswalks.

"I personally have almost been hit four times crossing at Rutland Square and Columbus Ave.," said Stephen Fox, chairman of the board of directors of the Rutland Square Association, which tends a sign in the middle of a busy crosswalk on Columbus Avenue to protect pedestrians. "I've seen dogs almost hit trying to cross. I've seen elderly people standing on the corner for a good five to seven minutes, afraid to put one foot in front of the other."

Even as they look for solutions, officials point to an age-old, seemingly intractable problem that they say is the heart of the matter. "The fundamental problem remains that there needs to be respect between drivers and pedestrians and pedestrians and drivers," said Thomas J. Tinlin, the city's acting transportation commissioner. "Otherwise all the signs and all the crosswalks and all the studies aren't going to make a difference."

Still, the issue is causing plenty of controversy in the South End. Earlier this month, the South End News ran a front-page story about the problem, and neighborhood leaders say the issue has been topping the agenda at resident association meetings.

Residents say several factors compound problems in the South End: Suburban commuters cut through the neighborhood to get to the Central Artery and the Massachusetts Turnpike, and Tinlin said shifting traffic patterns caused by the Big Dig only add to the confusion.

New condos have meant more driving residents, and new boutiques, theaters, and restaurants have increased pedestrian traffic and made nighttime double parking epidemics. One resident association president also pointed to the resurfacing of Washington Street several years ago, which got rid of potholes that once slowed speeders, and the double-long Silver Line MBTA buses that now cruise up and down the street.

For parents with children in tow, crossing the major streets can be nerve-racking. Carrie Alyea said she often finds herself marooned in the middle of Tremont Street crosswalks with her 4-year-old daughter, waiting for a motorist to stop. "You would think when people see a stroller they'd say, 'A child. Must slow down,' " she said.

Bill Gregor, chairman of Ellis South End Neighborhood Association, said drivers seem to consider stoplights "a kind of suggestion" rather than the law. "This is a city where there's a very clear right-on-red law that seems to have been extended to a left-on-red law as well," he said. "And frequently you'll see that it's also a straight-on-red law."

But many pedestrians are not exactly models of good citizenry on the streets, either. Sherwood Hughes, president of the Blackstone/Franklin Square Neighborhood Association, said he is amazed at South Enders' audacity on foot. "I see people crossing Washington all the time in the middle of the block, and then acting surprised when a car misses them by a foot," he said. "Maybe it's just me, but it just seems kind of logical that if a car's coming toward you, you stay on the sidewalk."

Boston officials say the city is working to make South End streets safer, as auto accidents this year rose to 267 last week, up from 254 in all of last year. About 85 of a planned 130 new count-down crosswalk signals have been installed in the neighborhood. Signals at several intersections have been reset to give pedestrians extra time to cross the street. Fluorescent green signs with a pedestrian stick figure have been posted on busy thoroughfares, and crosswalks are being resurfaced with bright new plastic epoxy for better visibility. Police say they have devoted extra hours each week to enforcing traffic stops in the area.

Some neighborhood leaders say it's not enough. The Rutland Square Association and the Union Park Neighborhood Association have gone so far as to buy signs and put them in the middle of busy crosswalks on Tremont Street and Columbus Avenue. Fox said the signs are more visible and effective than signs on the side of the road, and that Boston should follow the example of Washington, D.C., and put them throughout the city.

Tinlin said the city may buy a few of these signs next year. But he said that while it's fine if neighborhood groups and businesses adopt them, installing them citywide would not make sense because they would be a hassle to remove when it snows.

Bob and Mary Lionette, who founded Garden of Eden, a popular restaurant on Tremont Street, said that when they opened their outdoor patio a couple of years ago, the mayor's security detail arrived before the mayor and, as everyone waited for the celebration, the security detail began ticketing drivers who failed to stop for people in the crosswalk. Some attendees cheered, the Lionettes said, others looked puzzled. "The people who applauded were all South Enders," Mary Lionette said.

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