

SOUTH END

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## On Mass. Ave., a danger zone for pedestrians

By Meghan Irons, Globe Staff | November 23, 2008

Crossing major intersections on busy Massachusetts Avenue has long been a challenge for pedestrians. Walkers have to contend with aggressive drivers who don't yield to them, bikers zooming in and out of traffic, and a busy schedule of buses.

Some people who work and study at Boston University School of Public Health's new digs in the new Crosstown Building at Mass. Ave. and Albany Street say crossing the busy thoroughfare has become downright dangerous.

They say walk signals at that intersection flash on at the same time the green light activates, and that drivers making turns on the green light ignore pedestrians in the crosswalk. To make matters worse, pedestrians - some on cellphones - often cut in between cars that have edged into the intersection, waiting to turn.

Since the school moved some departments and classrooms to its new space at 801 Mass. Ave. earlier this year, at least six people - including two professors and a staffer - have been struck by cars. Sarah P.Z. Dwyer, manager of operations at BU's School of Public Health, said there have also been numerous close calls.

Complaints have been mounting, Dwyer said, with students, faculty and staff calling the intersection "scary."

Dwyer and others are urging increased police enforcement of the traffic regulations, traffic monitoring cameras, and the reconfiguration of the traffic light so that there is a four-way stop.

"I'm really concerned about the safety of anyone trying to get through there," said Dwyer, who coordinated the move of 150 BU School of Public Health employees from the BU medical campus on Albany Street to Mass. Ave.

The Boston Transportation Department, working with BU and Boston Medical Center officials, has responded. After a BU professor was struck in late August, city crews repainted the crosswalks and posted larger "Yield to Pedestrian" signs, as well as "No Turn on Red" signs. Signs also warn pedestrians to watch for turning vehicles.

"If they have a showdown with a vehicle," said Jim Gillooly, the city's deputy transportation commissioner, "the vehicle is going to win."

Gillooly defends the walk signals' being synchronized with the green light for drivers, saying they get people across the street quicker. In the next month, he said, new traffic signal controllers will be installed at the intersection so that pedestrians can get a jump-start crossing the street before the green light goes on.

More improvements are planned when a major two-year renovation begins on Mass. Ave. from Symphony Hall to near Melnea Cass Boulevard, he said.

In the meantime, the recent accidents, including the three reported to police - two in September and one this month - have renewed worry among the faculty, especially for those who have long complained that a move to Mass. Ave. would put students, faculty, and staff in peril.

"I've been predicting this," said Michael Siegel, a BU professor who is associate chairman of social and behavioral sciences. "We're lucky because at this point there has not been a tragedy. I think it's a matter of time before someone gets killed."

One of Siegel's colleagues, associate professor Anita Raj, a developmental psychologist, was leaving a meeting at Boston Medical Center and heading home Aug. 29, when she was struck as she stepped onto Mass. Ave. at Albany Street.

The impact sent her flying. She fell backward onto the hood of a car as it was still moving. "I was sliding down," she said after class on Tuesday, "and I thought, 'Oh my God.' "

Raj, who did not report the accident to police, escaped with some bruises and was able to drive herself home. But after the accident she fired off an e-mail to BU safety officials about pedestrian safety at the intersection.

The response was swift. But Raj said she worries about her students' safety, as well as that of the medical center's patients, especially people in wheelchairs and those who can't make it across the street in the 15 seconds that the walk signs allow.

The cross signal "is probably blinking by the time I'm close to the end," Raj said. "Some people coming to the hospital aren't so quick."

The building at 801 Mass. Ave. houses some BU School of Public Health departments and classrooms, as well as offices for Brigham and Women's Hospital and Boston Medical Center. Roughly 1,000 people work there, said Dwyer.

The extra foot traffic from the building only adds to the congestion, according to police, city transportation, and BU officials. Then there are the speeding ambulances. Two busy intersections sandwich Albany Street. One of them - at Melnea Cass Boulevard - feeds heavy traffic onto the interstate.

Mass. Ave. is always tough, but it's worse with Albany Street, said Boston police Captain William Evans.

Evans is part of a task force established in response to the safety complaints. An officer is frequently stationed at the intersection to watch for traffic violators, he said.

"It's a way to get people to slow down," he said.

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