

Mourning husband calls for safer roads for cyclists



Photo special to The Guardian by Edmund Aunger

Edmund Aunger and Elizabeth Ann Sovis are shown here in Port Elgin, N.B., wearing the reflective vests they always wore while cycling. Sovis was struck by a van and killed in P.E.I. on July 14, 2012, the day after this photo was taken.

Published on August 6, 2012

Teresa Wright

The husband of an Alberta woman killed while cycling in Prince Edward Island last month is calling on the P.E.I. government to make its roads safer for cyclists.

In a victim impact statement he posted online, Edmund Aunger says the province played a major role in his wife's death by promoting the Island as an ideal getaway for bicyclists despite the fact many of P.E.I.'s highways do not have paved shoulders.

"Prince Edward Island has actively promoted itself to cyclists as a welcoming holiday destination, but it has failed to provide them with travelling conditions that are as safe as those available to motorists," Aunger wrote.

"Therefore, the province must bear a major part of the responsibility for this fatality."

He and his wife, Elizabeth Ann Sovis, were on a cycling trip to P.E.I. on July 14, traversing the Confederation Trail from Borden-Carleton when they were forced to leave the trail and ride on the side of a highway to get to their bed and breakfast in Hunter River.

Aunger says he and Elizabeth always went out of their way to avoid riding along highways because she believed sharing the road with motor vehicles was too dangerous.

But with no other option to reach their destination, Aunger took the lead and they began cycling along Route 13, a two-lane highway with no paved shoulders.

“We had travelled only 2.6 km along Route 13 when I heard a loud bang behind me – the sound a forklift might make if it dropped a large load of lumber,” Aunger recalled.

He paid little mind to it until he noticed on-coming cars stopping, their passengers running down the road.

He turned around and peddled back, only to be met with a horrifying scene: his wife lying on the side of the road, a deep gash on her forehead, eyes glazed, blood running from her mouth.

“As Elizabeth lay dying, I kneeled nearby, prostrate, sobbing, crying out her name over and over, ‘Please Elizabeth. Please Elizabeth. Please Elizabeth.’ And I pleaded with God, ‘Please Lord God. Please help her,’” Aunger wrote in his impact statement.

Later he had to endure the devastating task of calling each of his three children to tell them their mother was dead.

“They couldn’t believe me. It broke their hearts. And my heart shattered over and over again,” he said.

“If it had been a nightmare, I would have awoken screaming. But I was already awake. And this was no terrorizing dream. It was a terrible, terrible reality.”

Afterward, he was overcome with guilt. He normally always rode behind Elizabeth when they bicycled together in order to let her set the pace and determine their stops.

But on July 14, Aunger had taken the lead to guide his wife to their B & B.

“When I married Elizabeth, I vowed to love, honour and protect her. In leading her onto a highway with no paved shoulder, I put her life at risk.”

But Aunger also believes the P.E.I. government bears some responsibility for his wife’s untimely demise.

He said Tourism P.E.I.’s brochure, Cycling Guide 2012, “heavily influenced” the couple’s decision to travel to P.E.I. for a bike tour. It describes how cyclists can serenely traverse the Island via the Confederation Trail.

“Nowhere in the guide does the province warn that cyclists cannot safely access or exit the Confederation Trail,” Aunger said.

“Nowhere does the province warn that Route 13, like other suggested highways, has no paved shoulders and presents a serious danger for cyclists.”

That's why he is now calling on the P.E.I. government to make P.E.I.'s roadways safer for cyclists and anyone walking or wheeling on the side of the road.

He sent copies of his victim impact statement to Tourism Minister Robert Henderson, Transportation Minister Robert Vessey and Justice Minister Janice Sherry. In it, he says the province should build a transportation network that is as safe for bicycle riders as it is for automobile drivers.

"As a minimal requirement the province must pave shoulders on its highways and design lanes for cycling. It must also build more dedicated cycling paths," he said.

He also told The Guardian he hopes the public will take note of his tragic situation so they can understand the scope of his grief and the reason he feels so strongly action must be taken to make Island roads safer.

"My hope is that the P.E.I. government will act to prevent other senseless deaths."

RCMP arrested a man and later charged him with impaired driving causing death as a result of the fatality. Clarence Arnold Moase, 49, of Kensington was remanded into custody. He appeared in provincial court Monday, but the case was adjourned to Aug. 27 and he remains in custody by consent.

He has not yet entered a plea.

twright@theguardian.pe.ca