

Summary of River Road Findings

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Summary

River Road is situated in Palisades Park, and stretches from Fort Lee, NJ to Alpine NJ. It is a lovely park road that was converted to public use in the early 1900's. It is used by cyclists, boaters, hikers, picnickers, and drivers. This document is a summary of a study conducted to gauge cyclist use and satisfaction with River Road.

The history behind this study is a letter and a phone call made in 2004 to Carol Ash, Executive Director of PIPC, regarding the restriction not allowing cyclists to enter River Road through Palisades Ave. (alternatively known as Dyckman Hill). Because at the time 9W northbound from Palisades to State Line was under construction and was extremely dangerous, a request was made to lift the restriction. In addition, the southernmost Fort Lee entrance, was at the time, and continues to be, extremely dangerous for cyclists because the intersection makes no allowances for turns into the park, motorists are speeding, and the grade and design of the roadway is not amenable to turns. Although these engineering deficiencies of 9W are not under the control of PIPC, the restriction of access to the Palisades Ave. entrance is. Furthermore, PIPC can exercise some influence on NJ DOT if the entrance to their park poses danger to users. It was also my observation that the effect of these entrance dangers had an impact on the behavior of park users, by making them less likely to use the park.

After receiving a letter from Ms. Ash I was directed to Jim Hall, Superintendent in New Jersey, whom I wrote to arguing that Dyckman Hill could only be dangerous because of car drivers and a good solution would be to ban motorists. Mr. Hall answered me that the Palisades access would remain closed. At that point I asked Charlie Komanoff, of KEA Associates, the original cyclist to work with PIPC on behalf of cyclists on River Road, to assist me in speaking with Mr. Hall. Mr. Komanoff brought insight to the history of opening River Road to cyclists and stated that Palisades Ave. had been a bargaining chip to get the remainder of River Road opened, because the northernmost hill, at Alpine, was considered too dangerous for descents by the administration prevailing at that time.

Although PIPC said at the time that they would conduct a traffic study to determine the pent up demand for the entrance, a traffic count of cyclists and motorists, and cyclist perception of danger, the study was not done, and in a follow up conversation this year, we determined that I would do the study.

The administration's stated reason for keeping the Palisades Ave. entrance off limits to cyclists is that it is "too dangerous" due to its grade and steepness. Our survey does not support that hypothesis. Nor does it support the contention that a large percentage of cyclists have accidents on any portion of River Road: less than two percent of our respondents had an accident on any portion of the road. This is despite the poor pavement condition on the northernmost and southernmost ends.

Over one hundred cyclists who have used River Road in the last three years responded to the survey, which was conducted online, using cycling groups whose members are likely to use River Road (5BBC, e-bikes, and CRCA). The overall consensus is that it is a very nice place to ride. But their responses contradict the notion that the road is dangerous because of steepness or grade, only pointing to the pavement quality as a major deterrent to pleasant riding. **Furthermore, the majority did state that the access restrictions at Palisades Ave. were not only a major deterrent, but also made accessing River Road a very dangerous proposition because of the danger posed at the southernmost entrance.**

A true indicator of user satisfaction with PIPC River Road might be measured by their return rate to the park. Because PIPC mentions cycling on its website, there is an implicit assumption that PIPC has as its mandate to provide services to cyclists among a wide variety of users (including hikers, boaters, and picnickers).

The study shows that **27 percent** of those respondents who at one time in the last three years used River Road, use it to a lesser extent now. Among those abandoning the road, the top four reasons are **the poor pavement condition at the southern and northern ends, the dangerous southern entrance, speeding cars, and the fact that the Palisades Ave. entrance is closed to cyclists.** Furthermore, **a full 49 percent of all users** say that their ride would be better if they could access the entrance at Palisades Ave.

The image and perception of the park is also a measure of PIPC's overall success. Therefore, the study attempted to measure public perception and satisfaction. This study shows that PIPC is not winning its public relations efforts with the cycling public. The majority of respondents indicated that they have had no interaction with Palisades Park employees and police.

However, among those whom have had contact, the majority did not have a favorable opinion. Over 33 percent of respondents were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with PIPC employees and police, with many indicating that PIPC employees and police have negative feelings towards cyclists. Forty-seven percent say that the law is not equitably applied in the park, and many note anecdotally that they have witnessed or been the recipients of unequal treatment when compared to speeding motorists. More damaging, they say that PIPC police and employees themselves break the law routinely by speeding on River Road, and endangering cyclists as they pass too quickly. Unfortunately, PIPC police and employees have developed a reputation for being prejudiced against cyclists, and for having a disregard for their safety.

A demographic profile of cyclists shows that the majority have high incomes and are professionals or are engaged in high level occupations. Their negative opinions and perceptions could have a deleterious affect on the park's public image and operations.

In summary, based on respondents' answers, the portions of River Road that are considered most unrideable, are those that are not paved properly, and the roads' steepness of grade or turns is not considered a factor in rideability or safety.

Further, the logic that Palisades should remain closed to cyclists has no scientific basis. Conversely, cyclists did point out that the southern entrance is very dangerous, and the lack of access at

Palisades Ave. are both major factors in their enjoyment of the road, and in their desire to return. **In other words, rather than protect cyclists from danger, these policies actually increase their danger and affect their safety.**

Therefore PIPC should seriously reconsider its decision to restrict cyclists from the middle entrance, Palisades Ave. They should also let NJ DOT know immediately that the southern entrance is dangerous and needs either a traffic light, and/or a bike lane on the river side Hudson Terrace.

At the same time it should be noted that many cyclists take River Road because Rte. 9W has recently been reengineered, and there no longer is a bike lane from Palisades Ave. to E. Clinton, making it extremely dangerous for cyclists. Therefore the importance of making these changes is paramount to the safety of our citizens, and in the best interests of the States of New Jersey and New York.

Conclusion Summary:

- (1) There has been no history of use of the Palisades Ave./ Dyckman Hill entrance road to indicate that it is unsafe to cyclists.
- (2) In my study, less than two percent of the respondents indicated that a previous crash prevented them from coming back to River Road, but 27 percent mentioned access on the southern entrance and at the Palisades Ave. entrance as major factors in preventing them from returning. This shows that accidents and perceived danger from riding either on the northern end or at any end, because of steepness and grade, is not a factor.
- (3) The alternate southernmost entrance in Fort Lee/ Edgewater continues to be extremely dangerous to cyclists.
- (4) The reasoning that the northern end entrance is dangerous because the park has registered about 5 bike accidents a year bears no relevance to the Palisades Ave. entrance; nor does it bear any relevance to the reason to bar cyclists from Palisades Ave./ Dyckman Hill, or from any road for that matter unless it is a highway. On average, more than 36,000 people die and more than 3 millions are injured (2004 NTSB figures) in the United States every year from car and motorcycle accidents for a variety of reasons, and there is no constitutional precedent to bar them from using highways because they have accidents. The same is held for cyclists.
- (5) The practice of barring cyclists from the road dates back to a previous administration of PIPC whom were not in favor of opening access to cyclists, in particular because of concerns about cyclists on the entire roadway, and as a bargaining chip, Mr. Komanoff offered to keep cyclists off the middle entrance. This “trade” has lost its imperative, while at the same time external factors (the poor intersections at the southern entrance, the general increase in motorist traffic, and the negative reengineering of 9W), have created an overriding imperative to open the safest entrance to cyclists.
- (6) In general, law enforcement on River Road is perceived as inequitable, favoring motorists over cyclists. The reasoning that cyclists could “lose their brakes” is no more likely for a cyclist than for a motorist, nor is loss of control. Furthermore, more cyclists are using the road more often than

motorists, which makes them the preferred customer. They also keep the park safer because they go slower, and can witness and hear if hikers are in danger. They also kill fewer animals, pose less of a danger to hikers when passing, and overall contribute to the peaceful ecology of the park.

- (7) PIPC should focus a great deal more of its efforts in improving safety by regulating dangerous drivers, (including some among its own police and employees), who pose a much greater danger to cyclist, and whose poorly enforced dangerous driving create the reality and the impression of inequitable application of law and policies.

Therefore, I respectfully submit that the policy of not admitting cyclists to Palisades Ave. is without scientific, anecdotal, or observational merit.

Further, it is my belief, substantiated by this scientific study of 102 cyclists, that it would **not** be in PIPC's short and long term interests to continue its restriction against cyclists on Palisades Ave. Although the dangerous entrance at the southern end is not the responsibility of PIPC, not providing a safe, alternate route to the road is, and is contradictory to the park's own concerns, and mandate, to keep cyclists safe.

Further, it would be in the park's best interests to retrain its workers and police to apply park law and policy equally to motorists and to cyclists.

And finally, it would be favorable for PIPC to provide sensitivity and public relations training to PIPC administration and police that provides them with a more positive public image.

I would be happy to make myself available to act as a communicator to the cycling public, or to assist in further development of studies should PIPC wish to engage in these.

Detailed Summary of Findings

- 102 people answered the survey in a period of three days
- More than 46 percent ride River Road at least once a week; 32 percent ride it two to three times a week. But 88 percent ride the road at least once a week or more.
- 78 percent would ride River Road more often if they could.
- Why don't they ride more? The top four reasons were **the poor road conditions, limited time, the southernmost access road is too dangerous, and car drivers on the road drive too dangerously. 29 percent said they don't ride more because the middle access road is off limits, and 25 percent said the southernmost entrance is too dangerous**, preventing them from riding more.
- Police and motorist harassment and bad treatment were also cited as reasons why cyclists do not choose River Road more often.
- 27 percent ride less now than they used to.
- For those who now ride less than they used to, **the top three reasons for riding less are poor road conditions, southernmost entrance is too dangerous, and there is no access at Palisades Ave.** In addition, 11 respondents were treated badly by drivers on the road, and 9 respondents were treated badly by PIPC police. The new George Washington Bridge schedule has also been a factor in the decrease for some cyclists.
- But only 2 respondents had an accident on River Road, one of those on the northern end.

- PIPC employees were not rated well by cyclists. Many of the respondents, 23 percent, never had any contact with park employees, and 41 percent said “they do not go out of their way for me”. **Fifteen respondents said that Park employees are not helpful, and 6 said that they are “openly hostile” to cyclists, for a total of 21 percent perceiving park employees in a negative way.**
- In terms of overall satisfaction with Palisades Park employees and police, cyclists the majority are either “neither satisfied nor unsatisfied” or are “dissatisfied”, with 21 percent somewhat dissatisfied, and 12 percent very dissatisfied for a total of 33 percent unsatisfied as opposed to 13 percent somewhat and very satisfied. Among those respondents answering in detail, one said “law enforcement is openly prejudiced and hostile to cyclists,” and “seems they are anti-cyclist” , “police are nasty without reason”, and “seem to ticket cyclists more than cars.” Worse, several respondents wrote that the police do obey speed laws themselves, and have overheard police saying that they hate cyclists.
- Cyclists also perceive that PIPC administration and polices are not favorable to cyclists. 40 percent said that park regulations and polices are not satisfactory, with 8 percent very dissatisfied. Another 40 percent were indifferent, **leaving only 12 percent either satisfied or somewhat satisfied.** In general, cyclists perceive that PIPC administration gives preference to cars, and several asked for the middle access road to be opened.
- In terms of what cyclists think will make River Road better for cyclists, **72 percent asked for repaving of the road at the southern end, and 60 percent asked for repaving at the northern end. 59 percent felt that cars should be ticketed for driving too fast, and 50 percent said that the southern entrance needs to be made safer, 50 percent asked for a reduction in the speed limit for cars, and 49 percent asked for Palisades entrance to be opened to cyclists. 47 and 35 percent respectively asked for cyclists to be treated as equal to motorists.** comments called for the opening of Palisades Ave. with one person saying “it’s the safest access route, and it’s unbelievable that it’s blocked to cyclists.”
- The demographics of respondents using River Road are very important. More than 80 percent were from NYC, with 75 percent of the respondents from Manhattan. The majority ,65 percent, make over \$60,000 annually, and 56 percent make over \$75K. **The majority, 79 percent, are over the age of 36, making them mature, and more likely of sound judgment.**
- In terms of occupation, 26 percent were professionals and 38 percent were either self employed or upper management.