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Today's Paper

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Salem County, a rural NJ cycling destination, grapples with safety issues after death of Gaudreau brothers

In July, another cyclist was struck and killed by an impaired driver in Salem County.



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Richie Mathers, an Assistant Coach on a youth team that Johnny Gaudreau played for, visits the

memorial for brothers Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau, where the accident happened, in I ... **Read more**
Jessica Griffin / Staff Photographer

by Jason Nark
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On the edge of a Salem County cornfield noisy with late-summer crickets, a woman pulled her car off into the grass Wednesday morning, made the sign of the cross, and knelt in the gravel and broken glass.

She placed a bouquet of yellow flowers among the others, the memorial of hockey sticks, pucks, and jerseys on County Route 551 for brothers Johnny and Matty Gaudreau growing larger by the hour. Johnny, a star forward in the NHL, and Matty, who played at Boston College and various minor league teams, were riding bicycles here, in Oldmans Township, on Aug. 29 when a driver under the influence of alcohol ran them down, killing them both just hours before their sister's wedding. Their funeral [is next week](#).

"Fly high, Johnny Hockey," someone wrote on a Flyers jersey with black marker.

The road where Gaudreau brothers were cycling looks like many in Salem County, and it represents both the draw and challenge of cycling here. Its scenic two-lane road winds past fields, farms, and wildflowers, but lawn signs complain about nearby warehouse development. Heavy, multi-axle dump trucks flyback and forth. There is no dedicated bike lane on the road and less than a foot of shoulder, perhaps less, between the painted white line and the grass.

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FILE - Columbus Blue Jackets' Johnny Gaudreau looks on during an NHL hockey game against the Philadelphia Flyers, Tuesday, April 11, 2023, in Philadelphia. (AP Photo/Chris Szagola, File)
Chris Szagola / AP

The rural roads of Salem County

Salem County, about 30 miles south of Philadelphia, is New Jersey's most rural county. It's home to the nation's oldest weekly rodeo and roadside tomato stands, with tens of thousands of acres of preserved farmland. When people wonder where exactly the "Garden" is in the Garden State, it's Salem County.

The county's long country roads are popular with cyclists too and on any given weekend, you'll see hundreds pedaling hard past the cows and swamps along Kings Highway or in the marshes that intersect the Salem Nuclear Plant. People come from surrounding counties to ride in Salem, from Philadelphia too, and Delaware, just over the bridge, said Mike Fraser, owner of Sneakers & Spokes, a bicycle shop in downtown Woodstown.

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All of them are looking for a refuge, Fraser said, thinking rural Salem County would be a safe haven for cycling.

“Obviously not,” Fraser said Wednesday morning in his busy shop, about 5 miles from the crash scene.

While some rural roads have lower traffic volumes and speed limits, the perception that they’re safer is mostly a myth. On the road where the Gaudreau brothers were cycling, signs were spiked into lawns, complaining about nearby warehouse development, an issue many cyclists vented to the Inquirer about. There was no dedicated bike lane on the road and less than a foot of shoulder, perhaps less, between the painted white line and the grass.



Mike Fraser, owner of Sneakers and Spokes in Woodstown, NJ, September 4, 2024.

Jessica Griffin / Staff Photographer

The New Jersey Bicycle and Pedestrian Resource Center at Rutgers University said rural roads have higher risks for cyclists because of lighting issues, the potential for unchecked speeding, and narrow widths. There are fewer sidewalks, signage, and crosswalks too.

According to the National Highway Transportation Administration, 20 percent of the U.S. population lives in rural areas, but 40 percent of all traffic deaths occur on rural roads. Sangeeta Badlani, founder of Families for Safe Streets New Jersey, said there is a 36 percent increase in cyclist deaths in the state compared to this time last year.

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“We don’t have a safe infrastructure,” Badlani, who lost a son in a vehicle crash, said.

When Fraser heard about the death of the Gaudreau brothers, he

thought, “Oh no, not again.” In July, Douglass Nutt, a 62-year-old Boy Scout master who worked in the insurance industry, was run down and [killed by another impaired driver while cycling past farmland](#) on Shirley Road in Upper Pittsgrove.

Fraser said a doctor recommended Nutt get a bicycle for some exercise.

“And that’s a beautiful road he was on. It’s a road that all of us gravitate toward. It’s got five feet of clear shoulder and vision for miles and this still happened,” he said.



Opening night of Cowtown Rodeo in Pilesgrove, Salem County in 2018.

Tim Tai / Staff Photographer

Fraser said Salem County has seen its share of development too, bringing in more traffic and larger, heavier vehicles. On Route 40, which once traversed the entire width of the county, vast stretches of warehouses are being built on former farms. Outside of Fraser’s shop, on Route 45, dump trucks, construction equipment, and tractor-trailers were barreling through Wednesday morning.

Fraser’s vowed to do something about bicycle safety in Salem County, saying he’s “had enough” in a [recent post on the shop’s Facebook](#) page.

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“I’ve had way too many close calls with distracted drivers speeding in excess of 100 mph and triaxle dump trucks close enough I could have touched them,” he wrote. “I obey the laws riding my bike. I wear bright clothes, ride with blinking lights, and yet all that seems futile with some drivers who could care less.”

Fraser said he’s planning a town hall in Woodstown as soon as he can and he’s reached out to local elected officials, including Assemblyman Dave Bailey Jr.

“I don’t want it to be a ranting event. There has to be ideas and I’m being inundated with ideas,” he said. “For one, we need to talk about dedicated bike lanes or wider shoulders.”



Mike Fraser, owner of Sneakers and spokes in Woodstown, NJ, September 4, 2024.

Jessica Griffin / Staff Photographer

Bailey, in a statement to the Inquirer, said he's ready to help.

"I'm an avid bike rider and I've spent a lot of time riding on Salem County roads, so I know firsthand that we have some of the least bike-friendly infrastructure in the state. I plan to work with county and local leaders to find ways to make biking safer here, including expanding trail options as an alternative to on-road cycling," he said.

'I'm selling my bike'

Fraser said he'd also like elected officials to help Salem County get connected to a larger network of state rail trails, to separate cyclists from motor vehicle traffic.

"If I could get everyone off the road and onto gravel, I would," he said.

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Andrew Varga, a 45-year-old Woodstown resident who took up cycling to deal with PTSD after serving in the Marine Corps in Iraq, said he rides with lights on his bicycle, day or night. He and Fraser [also use a radar detection system](#) mounted to the back of the bikes that informs the rider, via a computer on the handlebars about approaching cars.

"I did about 80 miles on Sunday and almost got hit by a cop who pulled out from a dirt road," he said.

Varga, who also lamented the warehouse construction and traffic it brings, said he isn't sure what could be done to make Salem County safer for cyclists. One friend, he said, has quit all together.

“He called me after this happened and said ‘I’m done. I’m selling my bike,’” Varga said.

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On Wednesday, at the memorial for the Gaudreau brothers, some cars slowed to look. At least one motorist honked in frustration, swerving into the opposite lane to speed past. A woman who came to pay her respects shook her head in frustration.


“I would never ride a bike here,” she said.



Jessica Griffin / Staff Photographer



The memorial for brothers Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau, where the accident happened, in NJ.
Jessica Griffin / Staff Photographer

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I write stories and narratives about the outdoors and rural parts of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, the trails, towns, and people far from city life.
