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Police advance efforts toward bicycle safety

Rich Eldred

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BREWSTER -- Last week Padraig Schaler and his family, along with friends and supporters, returned to Brewster from Ireland for the first time since a 2013 collision with a van while he was bicycling to work left him with serious brain damage and confined to a wheelchair.

They walked a mile, pushing Padraig in his chair, from the Brewster Police Station to the scene of the crash on Route 6A. The walk was to promote safe biking and awareness of bikers by drivers.

Since then Brewster has actively worked to make the town's roads more bicycle friendly and the many summer workers who come to the Cape more safety conscious. Most of the roads here were not designed with bicyclists or pedestrians in mind.

"Let me say that our thoughts are with Padraig Schaler and his family as he continues to recover from his injuries. Five years ago he was involved in a crash that forever changed not only his life, but the lives of those closest to him," Brewster Police Chief Heath Eldredge wrote The Cape Codder in an email. "The case Padraig was involved with showcases the vulnerability of cyclists and pedestrians while they are sharing the roadway with motor vehicles. The 'Share the Roadway' campaign is one we have long been involved with here in Brewster."

Over the last five years the police have pushed for additional "Share the Road" signs in town and distributed "Same Roads, Same Rights, Same Rules" bumper stickers.

"We have created a flyer regarding bicycling safety in Brewster and distributed them to riders on our bike paths and passed out hundreds of bicycle helmets and lights," Eldredge said.

The helmets are available for foreign summer workers.

The police have gone to J1 student orientations to talk about bike safety and worked with the DPW and state officials to build and improve sidewalks along Route 6A. When the gas pipes were installed a couple of years ago that was used as an opportunity to extend the sidewalks.

The police have also worked with the bikeways committee to install better signage at bike trail crossings along with solar powered warning lights. They've added extra patrols of cruisers and police bikes for crosswalk and bicycle enforcement and used the internet to spread the word.

"We understand that some of Padraig's family is not satisfied with the investigation that was performed during the 2013 crash and that they are unhappy that the motor vehicle operator was not found to be at fault," Eldredge noted. "However, we stand by the integrity of the investigation, which included multiple eyewitnesses. At the Schaler family's request, we were contacted by the Attorney General's Office in 2015 and all information related to the case, including depositions given during a civil proceeding, were turned over for review and we cooperated fully. There was no finding of impropriety."

While Schaler is confined to a wheelchair he can now travel, communicate, enjoy music, eating out and meeting people. Much of that wasn't considered possible when he was in a coma following the crash.

"None of this takes away the pain felt by the Schaler family. We are heartened to see that Padraig has recovered to a point that he has been able to return to Brewster," Eldredge said "We were pleased to be able to assist them with an escort as they took this important and symbolic step forward."