

Media

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by Jeanne Schram | [0 comments](#)

Pedestrian deaths across state reach 25-year high

The subject of pedestrian safety has been raised recently through the pages of the *Aitkin Independent Age* and at the Aitkin County Toward Zero Deaths Coalition.

Pedestrian deaths climbed in 2016 with a preliminary figure of 60 fatalities compared with a final figure of 41 in 2015. This is the highest number of pedestrian deaths since 1991 (61) and a 50 percent increase in fatalities in the past five years (2012–2016).

There have been nine pedestrian personal injury accidents in the city of Aitkin since 2010, according to Aitkin Police Chief Tim Catlin. There was one pedestrian death a number of years ago.

“It works both ways,” said Catlin, who said his department has observed more pedestrian violations than motorist violations.

Since the downtown signal light is not automatic, pedestrians must push the walk button and wait for the walk signal.

“We all have to slow down,” said Catlin, “and pedestrians need to pay more attention.”

Catlin said the state has been working with the city to improve pedestrian safety, “but you can only put up so many signs,” before they become ineffective.

Aitkin officers have spent more time watching traffic and speaking with pedestrians about use of the stoplight walk signal and the new green arrow turn light on the east side of the intersection.

“My own vigilance is what’s kept me alive,” said Georgia Johnson, who has lived in Aitkin for 28 years.

Unless it’s raining too hard or the temperature is well below zero, Johnson, 80, walks two miles daily. And she wears cleated shoes.

She said she’s had a few close calls, notably, once in the middle of a crosswalk, a car nearly mowed her down. A couple crosswalks are especially dangerous, she said, those being between the post office and Family Dollar, and near the Aitkin United Methodist Church.

“I am cautious no matter where I cross,” Johnson said. “I don’t intend to stop walking.”

Aitkin resident John Newstrom also shared his concerns in the letters section of the *Aitkin Age* in November.

A walker, he said he hasn’t had any close calls with motorists, “but I could have if I hadn’t been alert,” he noted.

The problem crossings he has observed are one block east of the stoplights near Aitkin Motors, one block north of the stoplights near Butler’s and a three block area from Sorensen-Root-Thompson Funeral Home to Aitkin Health Services.

One thing that would help in these areas is more frequent painting of the crosswalks as they often fade between paintings and are harder to see.

Newstrom proposed three approaches to the problem: driver education programs, stronger enforcement of infractions and additional visual engineering methods to mark crossings.

“Statistics show more pedestrian fatalities occur at night,” said Newstrom. “It could be due to more alcohol consumption by motorists and pedestrians. Also, many pedestrians wear dark clothing. It would be a good idea to wear bright clothing and carry a flashlight, anything we can do to catch a driver’s attention.”

He also noted that morning and evening low sun hours make seeing difficult for everyone.

When it comes to pedestrian injuries and fatalities, there’s enough blame to go around.

Paul Bruggman, coordinator of the Aitkin County TZD, said the increase in pedestrian deaths statewide is first, because pedestrians aren’t paying enough attention, and second, drivers are distracted.

“Put your phones down (both pedestrians and drivers),” Bruggman said. “Don’t try to multi-task or do anything to take your mind off what you are doing.”

“It is distressing to see such an increase in pedestrian deaths,” said Donna Berger, Office of Traffic Safety director. “It’s especially upsetting because this doesn’t have to happen. These tragedies are preventable but it requires both motorists and pedestrians to do their part. If we all follow some simple guidelines such as paying attention, lives will be saved.”

Motorists should:

- Treat every corner as a crosswalk and stop for pedestrians crossing at all corners and crosswalks, whether marked or unmarked – this is the law.
- Drive at safe speeds and be alert for pedestrians.
- Pay attention: Drive distracted-free. Driver distraction is a leading cause of pedestrian/vehicle crashes.

Pedestrians should:

- Cross at a corner, a marked crosswalk or where a traffic light is present.
- Never cross in the middle of the road or walk down an interstate.
- Wear bright colored clothing when walking at night.
- Pay attention and look both ways before crossing. Even if you have the right of way, it’s important to check for vehicles, especially those that might be making a right turn into your path. Making eye contact with all drivers before you cross, and as you are walking across the street, can ensure your safety.

Catlin said he appreciates getting public input on safety matters in Aitkin so the police department can work to improve all traffic and pedestrian problems.