

Atlantic Avenue leads PBC in crashes

Three intersections along the Delray Beach portion of roadway dominate list of 2021's worst five

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DELRAY BEACH – Atlantic Avenue has become the most crash-prone road in Palm Beach County, with three intersections ranking in the Top 5 for wrecks during 2021, according to county Traffic Engineering Division figures.

The three trouble spots sit within 2 miles of each other from Interstate 95 west to Military Trail, a congested stretch of homes, condos, retail stores and medical offices. The intersection at Military had 96 wrecks, tying for most in the county with an intersection by the Mall at Wellington Green.

Just to its east, the intersection at Atlantic and Congress finished fourth with 87 crashes. Atlantic and I-95 ranked fifth at 77, the highest reported.

It doesn't get much better in smaller, two-lane road intersections along Atlantic Avenue. Atlantic and Jog Road saw 44 crashes last year, followed by Lyons Road with 40 wrecks and State Road 7 with 21. In Delray Beach's downtown, Federal Highway had 32 crashes, placing it sixth among the most crash-prone roads along Atlantic Avenue.

A drive along Atlantic from the ocean to the Everglades finds it filled with more cars, trucks and tractors than it can handle. Vehicles merge onto it from the intersections, shopping centers and strip malls that line its 9-mile path.

During rush hours, vehicles sit bumper to bumper near most intersections, unable to advance even when the traffic signal turns green. At other times, drivers race to beat the next red light, suggesting why most of the wrecks on the road are rear-end collisions. None of 2021's wrecks were fatal.

"It has been identified as a corridor that has been overcapacity for a while," said Motasem Al-Turk, director of the county's traffic division.

And it's likely to get worse before it gets better as development turns vacant land into homes and businesses and Atlantic absorbs more vehicles.

County officials say they can't stop the problem of distracted drivers — a leading cause of rear-end crashes — and that Atlantic won't become less congested until the state expands its lanes in 2024 and 2027.



The intersection of Atlantic Avenue and Lyons Road in Delray Beach on May 26.

GREG LOVETT/PALM BEACH POST

Some residents are disappointed they'll have to wait that long.

"We are not happy about the timeline," said Lori Vinikoor, president of the Alliance of Delray Residential Associations. "We needed the expansion yesterday."

For years, Vinikoor said, the alliance has pleaded with city and county officials to go faster, but since Atlantic is a state road, neighbors have left meetings feeling all they can do is wait.

"It is a burden on the public. It is a burden on our motorists," said Vinikoor, a resident for 28 years. "But unfortunately, what can we do?"

Atlantic Avenue opened in 1945, when Palm Beach County's population was about 100,000, or the number living in the Delray Beach area now. It's one of the few east-west roads that stretches from State Road 7 to State Road A1A and has access to Florida's Turnpike, Interstate 95 and U.S. 1.

Amid that access, Atlantic is overwhelmed, Al-Turk said. Crashes spiked last year as traffic volumes rebounded to pre-pandemic levels.

A four-lane road, like Atlantic is east of the turnpike, is built to handle 33,200 car trips per day, Al-Turk said. In 2020, that stretch of Atlantic averaged 45,400, county figures show. A two-lane road, which is what Atlantic is west of the turnpike, is built for 15,200 car trips per day. In 2020, Atlantic averaged 19,500.

"That shows how clearly it is over capacity now," said Al-Turk, who said Atlantic exceeded its capacity in 2018.

Al-Turk estimates Atlantic and Military — with retail plazas on all four corners and ringed by residential neighborhoods — sees about 84,000 car trips per

2021 crashes

Atlantic Avenue intersections

1. Atlantic and Military Trail, 96
2. Atlantic and Congress Avenue, 87
3. Atlantic and Interstate 95, 77
4. Atlantic and Jog Road, 44
5. Atlantic and Lyons Road, 40
6. Atlantic and Federal Highway, 32

day, resulting in 96 crashes. All involved vehicle damage, and 46 were rear-end collisions.

Atlantic and Congress saw around 75,000 car trips en route to its 87 crashes. Atlantic and I-95 was at the top of the range traffic planners expect for roads that connect to an interstate highway, with 46,200 daily car trips.

Al-Turk said the number of crashes doesn't tell the whole story of how dangerous an intersection has become. That's why county planners determine a crash rate for them, comparing the collisions to the number of cars using the road. It helps them compare crossroads across the county.

Atlantic's intersections scored poorly in this metric as well. Three placed among the five with the highest crash rates: Atlantic and Congress placed second with a score of 3.26, Atlantic and South Military Trail third at 3.150 and Atlantic and Federal Highway downtown at 3.008. The county leader was U.S. 98 and Muck City Road in Pahokee at 3.43.

In a prepared statement, Delray Beach Mayor Shelly Petrolia said the city has adopted a goal of zero traffic fa-

talities and serious injuries and is planning a review of "our current roadway planning processes."

She said it is seeking federal funds to pay for a study of the issue that will identify best practices and improve communication between government officials, residents and businesses. Petrolia said her city "does not own many of the major intersections in question" but is eager to find "collaborative solutions" that will make the intersections safer.

The Palm Beach Transportation and Planning Agency has identified two projects along Atlantic as priorities in its five-year plan.

The Florida Department of Transportation will widen Atlantic to four lanes from two from State Road 7 to east of Lyons Road starting in 2024. It is planning similar improvements from Lyons to Jog roads starting in 2027 but has not secured the money to pay for them.

Al-Turk and Vinikoor are optimistic that crash rates can drop when the work is finished, giving drivers chances to swerve into nearby lanes to avoid rear-ending cars.

"If we had expansion of the roadway, I think we can all cohabitate here," said Vinikoor, who even sees tractors driving on Atlantic's western stretches. "But with these constrained roadways, that's a problem."

There also is concern development in western Delray Beach will add so many more vehicles to the road that it will again be overcapacity again after the lanes are widened.

The Delray Beach Alliance met with county and state officials Feb. 18 to discuss the projects and their slow progress. It learned that COVID-19 delayed the collection of funds and the purchase of project materials. Also, officials said, the state still is buying land for the lane expansions.

"We understand that, but what can we do now?" said Vinikoor. "This is a time when development is booming, so that's not going to stop."

She says the state should've renovated Atlantic as development happened in the city and the county — and that widened lanes should have been in place before the road had to absorb new waves of vehicles.

The area's growth makes Vinikoor proud, but she fears the saturated roads will cost the area its relaxed, beach-town feel.

"Will we become 'Browardized?' We certainly hope not," said Vinikoor, referring to Palm Beach County's neighbor to the south. "But anything is better than what we have now."

Crashes

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es, local officials say.

Several of the county's most heavily traveled routes — including Atlantic Avenue, Okeechobee Boulevard, Military Trail and Congress Avenue — had multiple intersections ranked in the top 20 in terms of the number of crashes. Three intersections along Atlantic were in the top five, county statistics show.

"A lot of these places are going through areas that have a lot of development on them, so you're mixing a lot of high-speed roadways with a lot of access," said Andrew Uhler, deputy director of program development for the Palm Beach Transportation Planning Agency.

"Where there's a lot of turns, there's a lot of businesses and other types of activities that people need to get to. When you're mixing ... high-speed roadways and access like that, you're going to lead to more crashes."

Statistics from the website Signal Four Analytics show that more than 13,000 crashes occurred at Palm Beach County intersections in 2021, resulting in 66 fatalities and 374 serious injuries.

Motasem Al-Turk, director of the county's Traffic Engineering Division, said crash statistics vary from year to year and from location to location, making it difficult to identify a trend.

"There are so many factors that can play into the frequency of crashes," Al-Turk said. "We obviously focus on the factors we can control or influence, like if there are any engineering fixes (such as) fix the design of the intersection, or provide lighting, if we can identify that there are more crashes that happen during the dark."

Wellington Village Manager Jim Barnes said no specific complaints regarding State Road 7 and Forest Hill Boulevard have been brought to his attention, but noted it is one of the busiest in the county with its proximity to commercial and retail spaces including the Mall at Wellington Green.



The intersection of Forest Hill Boulevard and State Road 7 in Wellington tied for the most crashes last year.

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Despite the number of crashes at State Road 7 and Forest Hill, Barnes said Wellington has seen improvement year over year in its overall traffic crash statistics in part because of efforts by the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office to address issues such as aggressive and impaired driving.

State Road 7 and Forest Hill has averaged 79 crashes over the past five years, including a high of 99 in 2017 and a low of 62 in 2020. Barnes described 2020 as an "odd year" for traffic statistics, noting that fewer cars were on the roads as many people worked from home because of the pandemic.

In Palm Beach Gardens, PGA Boulevard and Military Trail has averaged 75 crashes over the past five years, including 43 crashes in 2020, and usually scores as the most crash-prone intersection in northern Palm Beach County.

Commercial properties surround the intersection, which lies near both Interstate 95 and Florida's Turnpike.

"The intersection of PGA Boulevard and Military Trail is one of the busiest intersections in our city," city police said in a prepared statement. "We believe the recent increase in our community's population, as well as PGA Boulevard being a major connector of traffic between Interstate 95 and the Florida Turnpike, is one of the factors that con-

tributes to the high amount of travel as well as collisions."

The city's population grew by 22%, to nearly 60,000 residents, between 2010 and 2020, U.S. Census Bureau figures show. Palm Beach Gardens police said they have increased efforts "to promote driver safety and enforce traffic laws" in the area.

While several intersections among the top 20 were above their five-year average, one notable exception was Okeechobee Boulevard and Military Trail in suburban West Palm Beach.

In recent years, the location, surrounded by restaurants and retail stores, has been the county's most crash-prone intersection, averaging 114 crashes since 2017. It is the only intersection during the past five years to average 100 or more wrecks, data shows.

Yet the intersection recorded 69 crashes in 2021, a 16 percent decrease from its 2020 total of 82 crashes.

Fadi Emil Nassar, the county's manager of traffic engineering operations, said there have been no notable design changes made to Okeechobee and Military in recent years.

He added that the reduction in crashes at the location could be attributed the "randomness of crash phenomena and crash reporting by law enforcement."

The top 20

These Palm Beach County intersections recorded the most crashes during 2021, according to figures provided by the county Traffic Engineering Division.

1. (tie) State Road 7 and Forest Hill Boulevard, Wellington, and South Military Trail and Atlantic Avenue, Delray Beach, 96
3. PGA Boulevard and North Military Trail, Palm Beach Gardens, 91
4. Atlantic Avenue and Congress Avenue, Delray Beach, 87
5. Atlantic Avenue and NB Interstate 95, Delray Beach, 77
6. (tie) Palm Beach Lakes and Spencer Drive/Village Boulevard, North Congress Avenue and 45th Street and Okeechobee Boulevard and Wabasso Drive/Palm Beach Lakes Boulevard, all West Palm Beach, 76
9. Lake Worth Road and Congress Avenue, suburban Lake Worth Beach, 74
10. (tie) North Military Trail and 45th Street, West Palm Beach, and South Military Trail and Forest Hill Boulevard, suburban Palm Springs, 71
12. (tie) North Military and Okeechobee Boulevard, suburban West Palm Beach, and Okeechobee Boulevard and North State Road 7, Royal Palm Beach, 69
14. 10th Ave North and South Military Trail, suburban Greenacres, 68
15. 10th Ave North and South Congress Avenue, Palm Springs, 66
16. Lantana and Jog roads, suburban Lantana, 64
17. (tie) South Congress and Okeechobee Boulevard, West Palm Beach, and Southern Boulevard and State Road 7, Wellington, 62
19. (tie) Palm Beach Lakes and Executive Center Drive, West Palm Beach, Boynton Beach Boulevard and Congress Avenue, Boynton Beach, and Lantana Road and South Military Trail, suburban Lantana, 61