Rice protesters demand improvements at crossing where 2 bicyclists have died

By Samantha Ketterer

Protesters marched at a Rice University intersection Thursday where two people have died in less than two years, calling for improvements at what they say is a perilous crossing right outside the gates of the university.

Even as the protest continued Thursday, a car turning onto Main Street at the intersection with Sunset swung in front of a pack of university students who had just stepped out into the street with the protection of a green pedestrian crossing light.

They weren’t hit, but they still scrambled back onto the sidewalk.

“It’s scary,” graduate student Kathryn Kundrod said, hopping back onto the curb.

It was such fear that brought dozens of people out to the intersection in protest, advocating for change where two members of the Rice community have died.

The wounds are still fresh on campus after Sudipta Roy, 30, was hit and killed by a dump truck as she was bicycling across the same crossing on April 24.

“It could have been one of many people, and that’s kind of terrifying,” graduate student Ronan O’Connell said. The intersection “is a nightmare.”

The intersection is one of the most traveled in the area, several students said, citing Rice continues on A6

Rice students say short-term fix needs to be made soon

Rice from page A3

it as a main crossing point from the university to Hermann Park and the Museum District. But it’s also a complicated one — Sunset crosses there through both Main and Fannin, which are two-way streets located nearly side-by-side.

“I ride through this intersection every day, and I’m very aware of how dangerous it is,” Kundrod said. “I see near misses here all the time.”

Roy’s crash — which happened as she was leaving a lunch date with her husband at Rice — is the latest incident that highlights a long-standing problem at the crossing, said Ivan Fuentes of Bike Houston, a bicycle safety advocacy group.

Scientist and Rice Professor Marjorie Corcoran, 66, also died there on Feb. 3, 2017, when she biked over a set of Metro tracks along Fannin and Sunset and was hit by a crossing light rail train. The dual incidents prompted Fuentes and Bike Houston to call into question the city’s progress on promised fixes to the intersection at a Houston City Council meeting this week.

“[Adjustments] should have started out way before another death had to happen,” Fuentes said at the demonstration. “This should have started 14 months ago.”

“The city has been working with Houston Metro on alternatives at Sunset and Main,” city spokes-woman Alanna Reed said. One of those plans would prevent traffic on Sunset from continuing eastbound to Fannin and would instead direct motorists to Main Street, she said.

“After Dr. Marjorie Corcoran’s fatal accident last year at the Sunset and Fannin intersection, changes were already in design by Metro,” she said. “The city has approved a conceptual design and construction will begin upon approval of the final design.”

Mary Natoli, president of the Rice University Cycling and Triathlon group, which organized the demonstration, said temporary fixes need to be put into place if a long-term solution isn’t possible right away.

“I want a safe crossing for me on my bike, a place where cars know not to cross my path,” Nato-li said. “To the minimalist, before larger changes like that can be implemented, I would like to see a yield-to-bikes sign, a yield-to-pedestrians sign, a painted bike lane, even if it’s temporary, and red light cameras.”

Sudipta’s death has also raised questions about bicycle laws in the city. Law enforcement officials said that because she was in the road at the time of the crash and therefore must follow all the rules of a motorist, Sudipta may have been at fault.

Many bicyclists have disputed that Sudipta was responsible, considering that Texas law only prohibits people from riding bicycles on sidewalks in business districts.

A Houston ordinance also protects the bicyclist, Fuentes said. The law states that vehicles have to provide “vulnerable road users,” such as bicyclists, an appropriate amount of space between them before they turn in front of them.

Richard Clark, a professor at McGovern Medical School, was at the protest and said that many Rice and medical students might not know the traffic laws they’re supposed to follow.

“The bicyclists have to assume the drivers will do the wrong thing because that’s just the way it is,” Clark said.

Rice has been working with the city and hopes to eventually create intersections with signals about every two blocks around the campus.

“We are, have been, and will be active in our pursuit of improved safety and security on and near the Rice campus,” the university said in a statement.

Hundreds of students bike to Rice each day, often for convenience or affordability, said Deb-sha Bus Mallick, who works at the university.

“People should not feel threatened while biking to school,” Mallick said.

“It’s not just a leisure activity.”

samantha.ketterer@chron.com

twitter.com/sam_kett