

Cycling Activist Settles With Caltrans

By Tim Hay
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SAN FRANCISCO - A former Oakland city planner and advocate for the rights of bicyclists has settled a lawsuit against the Caltrans after an accident during a guided ride across the Bay Bridge left him with serious brain damage and paralysis in three limbs.

Terms of the confidential settlement were not disclosed. Alex Zuckermann was 81 at the time of the Oct. 26, 2002, accident, and was still riding his bike hundreds of miles on weekends.

"He was at the top of his game," said Ron Zuckermann, one of Alex's two grown sons. "He'd say, 'Any time the pavement is dry I'm out on the road.' He kept Excel spreadsheets of his times. He still raced."

Zuckermann, who fled Germany in 1938 and went on to get a master's degree in urban planning from UC Berkeley, worked in Oakland's planning department and founded the East Bay Bicycle Coalition.

"He single-handedly convinced BART to allow bikes," said Rick Baskin, who represented Zuckermann in the Caltrans suit. "He had permit No. 1."

Zuckermann got into bike riding and hang-gliding when he was in his 50s, his son said. Having the ear of city planners and transit agencies, he continually advocated for bike lanes on all area bridges - a dream that has been partly realized.

In 2002, Caltrans was studying the idea of placing cantilevered bike lanes along a certain span of the Bay Bridge, which was in the midst of a retrofit project.

Engineers from the agency invited Zuckermann to ride with them from Oakland to San Francisco and back on an October night when the bridge had been closed to traffic for construction. They were seeking his input on the creation of safe bike lanes.

While the three Caltrans engineers rode mountain bikes with wide rims and tires, Zuckermann rode a bicycle with narrow wheels.

"His thin, one-inch tire got caught in an expansion joint," Baskin said. "It bent the tire rim, and his tire went flat. He lost control and fell to the ground. His helmet cracked and he had a severe, traumatic brain injury."

Said Ron Zuckerman, "Due to the injury, he's been immobile and stuck in a wheelchair. He's had repeated health problems due to being stuck in one place. But he still has his spirit."

Though the elder Zuckermann is mentally acute, his extensive injuries make it difficult to carry on long conversations. His room at a skilled nursing facility in Berkeley is adorned with pictures of him riding his bicycle in earlier days, looking triumphant.

"The settlement helped us move him here," Ron Zuckermann said. "The quality of life here, the stimulation, the community involvement it's greater here. ... That's huge. You have to count your blessings at this point."

The lawsuit alleges that Caltrans should have done more to protect its invited guest from harm on the bridge. Zuckerman settled for an undisclosed amount, and the agency admitted no negligence in the case.

An attorney for Caltrans did not return a phone call for comment Wednesday.

The new eastern span of the Bay Bridge, currently under construction, will feature bicycle lanes. In July 2003, Assemblywoman Wilma Chan, D-Oakland, introduced a measure in Sacramento that will name the lanes after Zuckermann.

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