

Thinking Hard About Traffic Safety – Report on December General Meeting

From 1979 to 2009, efforts to bring down the number of pedestrian deaths resulted in a continued decline that eventually reduced deaths from 8,000 to 4,000 a year. But, just when traffic safety experts began to celebrate, the results began to creep back up and has been accelerating in recent years, rising to over 6,000 by now. There are many reasons for this, including everything from an improving economy putting more cars and pedestrians on the road, to a growing immigrant population that may have language issues and less familiarity with roads in this area. One huge issue is the rise in the use of smartphones that results in distracted driving – and distracted walking. Our efforts to encourage walking and bicycling (not to mention the use of scooters electric and otherwise) results in a highly dynamic set of interactions between modes of transportation operating at vastly different speeds and levels of protection. As a result, those trying to avoid untoward results face a complex analysis.

Vision Zero is a program concept that sets an ambitious goal of using all of the analytical, educational, and engineering tools available to reduce pedestrian deaths and serious injuries to zero. Both Montgomery County and the District of Columbia have signed on to the approach and are moving on numerous fronts to reach that goal. During our December meeting, we heard from representatives of both the County Planning and Transportation Departments about the principles of the Vision Zero program and steps the County is taking to implement those principles.

Vision Zero is based on several fundamental principles: 1. The term “accidents” is a misnomer because it implies we can’t figure out how to prevent crashes; 2. Life takes precedence over mobility, so we need to choose life if there is an unavoidable conflict; 3. Since speed is a huge factor in determining what happens if cars and people collide, traffic speeds may need to go down. 4 Safe behaviors can be improved through education and enforcement and government must use all of those tools; and 5 Perhaps most, critically: *human error is inevitable, so we need to design around the fact that people don’t behave perfectly.* Our road safety efforts must take that into account and use designs that make it easy to interact for all users to interact safely.

One of the primary areas the County has been studying with this approach is the Veirs Mill corridor running from Wheaton to Rockville. The road is wide, with fast-moving traffic, and crossings too far apart to be convenient (anywhere from 2,000 feet to as much as 3,600 feet). The County is looking at both short-term fixes such as adjusting sidewalks, adding bikeways on parallel streets, adding new crossings and the like. On a long-term basis, the County is looking at rebuilding the road using the concept of a “complete street,” where each mode of traffic has its own separated area. The general idea is to design these revamped streets within the total existing right of way owned by the county (although it might require some use of the grassy areas between the curb and existing sidewalks). One way to find room for separate areas for bikes and pedestrians is to put roads on a “diet,” i.e., to narrow each lane slightly to eke out room for the other features. Doing so has the secondary benefit of lowering speeds as drivers inherently slow down when the lanes feel less spacious.

The County is looking at adding several protected crossings along the corridor, with more signals drawing attention to the presence of pedestrians. One such location is planned to Norris Drive to create a crossing that would make it easier for pedestrians to cross to Newport Mill and Einstein High School. The analysis is moving forward in the Aspen Hill area with meetings being held to discuss the scope of the work and detailed data studies being carried out to direct the recommendations. The Department of Transportation is working on these design issues in areas that have been previously designated as

Bicycle and Pedestrian Priority Areas (BiPPAs), which are primarily in downtown areas and along major roads. The Georgia Avenue corridor, from Bel Pre down to the Beltway is one such BiPPA, with work being done on a number of projects to create a continuous safe bikeway. Among the engineering measures being considered for the BiPPAs and the Vision Zero work are improved road markings, sidewalk designs, median barriers to limit and channel crossing locations, and better lighting.

Another significant measure is lowering (and enforcing) speed limits. Most of the major roads in this area are state roads, so the County has to work with the state to be able to make those changes. State Delegate Al Carr also attended the meeting and spoke about what our District 18 delegation intended to do in Annapolis this year. He noted that they were there to help amplify our community voices and to ensure that state law and the state's financial resources would recognize that road are not built just for cars and must accommodate all interests. Some of the bills being considered included "don't block the box" legislation (i.e., allowing ticketing of those who remained in an intersection after the light changed) and one empowering the County to revise speed limits on state roads. Other measures would push the state to take more responsibility for upgrading and maintaining the sidewalks along state roads. He also provided a short explanation of the state capital budgeting process.

All of these measures are being reviewed and acted on at every level of government. As part of its Vision Zero efforts, the District of Columbia, for instance, passed a major package of traffic laws that became effective in January, that increased the fines applied to many violations and imposed criminal penalties on others. Other changes include a ban on right turns on red and restricting left turns at some intersections. In addition, pedestrians will have more time to cross at many intersections and there will be new zones for delivery trucks and ride-hailing drop-offs. (See https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/district-is-ramping-up-street-safety-measures-for-the-new-year/2019/01/05/7ccc95ce-feeb-11e8-83c0-b06139e540e5_story.html?utm_term=.902a85020600] for a discussion of these changes.)

County Executive Marc Elrich joined the Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee on January 8 to discuss these pedestrian safety issues among other topics. The Master Plan for the Veirs Mill Corridor has been submitted by the Planning Department and will be before the County Council at the end of January for a hearing. Many of its provisions directly address these traffic and safety design issues. KHCA is reviewing the plan to see how it may affect our borders and will likely comment and/or testify on the Plan at the hearing. In short, unlike the weather, everyone is not only talking about the issue but clearly appear to be poised to do something about it. We hope those changes will help the County to achieve its vision in the near future.