

# SAVING PEDESTRIAN LIVES

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pedestrian and vulnerable road user fatalities continue to climb in Virginia at an alarming rate. Virtually all roadway fatalities are preventable with the right infrastructure and enforcement, but more than 1,000 Virginians will continue to die every year if we don't change our policies and what we fund. Specific steps must be taken to save lives by reducing car speeds, better educating all road users, and redesigning our roadway network for better pedestrian protection. The tools to reverse this tragic trend are as simple as sidewalks and pedestrian refuges, but Virginia needs to find the political will and resources to make a change.

## CHALLENGE

2022 saw a significant increase in pedestrian fatalities in Virginia. This 36% increase in deaths over 2021 claimed 46 more lives and is among the worst pedestrian fatality rates in the entire nation.<sup>1</sup> The spike in people killed while walking is more than the 4.3% traffic fatality increase across all modes (46 compared to 42 additional lives lost) in that period as Virginia's roadway death toll topped 1,000 lives lost for the first time in 16 years.

The massacre on our roadways is the result of worsening speeding, larger vehicles like SUVs and trucks with limited visibility, increases in driver impairment and distraction, and roadway design that prioritizes cars' speed over the lives of the Commonwealth's residents.

Police enforcement alone has not effectively reduced traffic fatalities. The only consistently reliable way to get drivers to slow down is to redesign our roads with improved infrastructure such as raised crosswalks, speed humps, narrower lanes, bulb-outs, and pedestrian refuges. These relatively low-cost solutions can add up quickly at the scale the Commonwealth needs to deploy them, but despite VDOT's \$8 billion annual budget, there never seems to be enough money available for simple safety improvements like adding sidewalks to state roads.

In light of record road fatalities, it is time to redesign and reissue the Virginia Driver's Manual to put safety first. Drivers must be taught how to operate their vehicles safely around pedestrians, cyclists, and other road users.

All people are pedestrians at some point, even those who primarily drive or who are unable to walk, and improving pedestrian safety increases safety outcomes for all other road users.

## SOLUTION

Speed cameras are an effective deterrent to speeding, which is the number one predictor of crash mortality. Not only do they lessen the staff burden of traffic enforcement, but they also apply enforcement equitably, consistently, and without bias. Although automated photo speed enforcement (ASE) has been shown to reduce the number of drivers speeding by up to 60%,<sup>2</sup> this

safety tool is currently only authorized in school zones and work zones. Their use needs to be allowed in other high pedestrian traffic areas such as residential and business districts.

Virginia currently allows localities to lower speed limits on municipal roads in residential and business districts to as low as 15 MPH, but VDOT has interpreted this to not apply to state-owned roads. Outside residential and business districts, the traffic study requirement has made such changes prohibitively expensive. The law needs to be fixed to solve both problems.

State-owned roads in residential and business districts are where most pedestrian traffic fatalities occur, often called the "high injury network".<sup>3</sup> These high-injury networks should be codified into pedestrian safety zones modeled after the Interstate Safety Corridors to dedicate more funding, programming, and automated enforcement of safety in these zones.

Pedestrian-focused safety infrastructure is not being built to outpace the growth in fatalities, so more funding and safety programming needs to be dedicated to saving these lives. This includes dedicating more state funding to infrastructure projects that can be used quickly and responsively to shift safety needs.

The Virginia driver's manual deemphasizes pedestrian safety and does not include updated information about safe street designs and how to drive around them. It is in need of an overall to meet this dire safety challenge, ensuring all Virginians know how to drive safely around people walking.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Authorize localities to use Automated Photo Speed Enforcement systems to residential neighborhoods and business districts.

Allow local authority to lower speeds on state-controlled roads for safety in residential and business districts.

Redesign and reissue the Virginia Driver's Manual with a new special emphasis on pedestrian and bicyclist safety, including mandatory bike/ped questions on the driver's exam.

Allocate 10% of the State's surplus funds in a given year to road safety infrastructure improvement projects.

Establish a Pedestrian Safety Corridor program similar to the Interstate Safety Corridor program to increase awareness, safety resources, and enforcement in areas of high pedestrian safety crashes.

Prioritize pedestrian safety in the ongoing update of SMART SCALE.