

SAVING PEDESTRIAN LIVES

Mike Doyle // Northern Virginia Families for Safe Streets // mike@novafss.org
Brantley Tyndall // Bike Walk RVA // brantley@sportsbackers.org

WHY IT MATTERS

Transportation continues to be the leading generator of greenhouse gases in Virginia, and encouraging active modes is essential to achieving any meaningful climate goals. Pedestrian and vulnerable road user crashes continue to climb in Virginia at an alarming rate, up 15% in 2023. Virtually all roadway fatalities, which affect Black and Brown people at more than twice the average rate, are preventable with the right infrastructure and enforcement.

Without adequate policies and funding, traffic fatalities will continue to take nearly 1,000 lives each year. Specific steps must be taken to reduce car speeds, educate all road users, and redesign our roadway network for better pedestrian protection. Virginia needs policy and resources must proactively implement the tools to reverse this tragic trend such as simple sidewalks and pedestrian refuges. Creating safer streets for pedestrians, cyclists, and all vulnerable road users will improve air quality, reduce fossil fuel extraction, production, and consumption, and reduce demand for the destructive expansion of highways.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

In 2023, 1,554 pedestrians were injured as a result of a driver of a vehicle crashing into them, up 15% from 2022.

Traditional police enforcement has and can not effectively reduce traffic fatalities. The most reliable way to slow drivers is to redesign our roads with safety-oriented infrastructure such as raised crosswalks, speed humps, narrower lanes, bump-outs, and pedestrian refuges. The Virginia Department of Transportation's (VDOT) \$8 billion annual budget has not prioritized these designs at the scale necessary to significantly curb the danger to vulnerable road users.

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.

OPPORTUNITIES

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%, this safety tool is currently only authorized in school zones and work zones. Speed cameras must be enabled in other high pedestrian traffic areas such as residential and business districts and areas with a history of traffic fatalities.

Another important safety program is VDOT's Neighborhood Traffic Program. The purpose of the program is to work with communities to decrease the impacts of traffic and enhance safety in area neighborhoods. Typically the county DOT and VDOT analyze traffic calming options to make the residential roads safer but after the safety study is done, VDOT requires 50.1% of the residents in a neighborhood to approve traffic calming designs to be installed. This popularity contest should be eliminated so transportation safety decisions can be made by professionals and those in charge of saving lives.

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 quick-build projects that do not take 6-8 years to implement. 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 needs an overhaul to meet this safety challenge, ensuring all Virginians know how to drive safely around people walking.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

Localities need authorization to use Automated Photo Speed Enforcement systems in residential neighborhoods and business districts, and in areas with a history of traffic fatalities to more effectively reduce loss of life.

For residential roads where a locality and VDOT have studied and recommended street design calming measures, the 50.1% neighborhood vote requirement should be eliminated because safety should not be a popularity contest.

A higher proportion of VDOT's funding to safety infrastructure should be dedicated to safety, and vulnerable road user safety in particular.