Seattle Department of Transportation

VISION ZERO
TOP-TO-BOTTOM REVIEW

Overview: Momentum-Building Actions and Recommendations

February 2023
While Seattle’s streets are some of the safest in the United States, we still see more than 10,000 crashes a year, resulting in an average of 28 people losing their lives and 180 people seriously injured, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. For comparison, in 2019 cities of similar size like Denver and El Paso had 61 and 69 traffic deaths respectively.

On his first day on the job, Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) Director Greg Spotts, with Mayor Bruce Harrell’s support, issued a call to action for a top-to-bottom review of our Vision Zero efforts. Vision Zero is Seattle’s goal to end traffic deaths and serious injuries on city streets by 2030. Vision Zero is part of an international movement, shifting the approach of traffic safety to focus on the most effective ways to reduce harm while creating a culture of care and dignity for all travelers.

The top-to-bottom review considers the effects the pandemic had on streets locally and nationally, uses data analysis to show where to focus investments and what actions to take, identifies internal challenges holding us back, and makes 12 recommendations. One problem identified was inadequate funding. We are pleased that the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) recently announced its decision to award Seattle $25.6 million in Safe Streets and Roads for All Implementation (SS4A) grant funding, allowing the City to invest in over 100 intersection safety projects. More than 90 percent of the projects are within underserved community census tracts in Seattle. Seattle was one of only 37 jurisdictions nationwide to receive an implementation grant.
Many recommendations resulting from the top-to-bottom review will take time to implement and see results. Understanding the need for immediate action, Mayor Bruce Harrell and SDOT Director Greg Spotts have also identified five momentum-building actions to implement in 2023.

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At locations where LPIs were installed in Seattle between 2009 and 2018, there has been a 48 percent reduction in turning crashes involving pedestrians and a 34 percent reduction in serious injury and fatal pedestrian crashes. |
| 3. Be champions for Vision Zero as we engage with our partners | Partner with Sound Transit to implement a series of improvements along Martin Luther King Jr. Way S to enhance safety for all travelers.  
Projects include, but are not limited to, increasing train warning bell volume, evaluating traffic signals, refreshing pavement markings, launching a safety campaign, and making it easier and more convenient to cross the street at stations. |
| 4. Expand automated enforcement in a data-driven equitable way | Engage the public on automated enforcement to address equity concerns about future expansion in neighborhoods with many fatalities and serious injuries.  
Automated enforcement cameras have been installed in various locations over the past years. Looking at before and after data spanning 2004 and 2018 we saw a 20 percent reduction in crashes across all signals with a red-light camera, and a 50 percent reduction in crashes at school zones with a speed camera. |
| 5. Strengthen SDOT’s Vision Zero core and matrix teams | Elevate City Traffic Engineer to a Chief Safety Officer role. |
Safe Streets and Roads for All Grant Award

On January 30, SDOT was awarded $25.6 million from the U.S. Department of Transportation’s (USDOT) new Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) grant program which requires Seattle to invest $5.1 million as a match, for a $30.7 million total program. The funding supports implementing a variety of proven crash countermeasures (new sidewalks, ADA curb ramps, leading pedestrian intervals, protected bike lanes, crossing improvements, and more), and the investments are heavily concentrated in underserved communities.

The original proposal recommended a $37.5 million investment, including Seattle’s match. Cities around the United States suffer from a backlog of traffic infrastructure needs. However, Mayor Bruce Harrell and SDOT Director Greg Spotts agree that all the investments in the proposal are critical and pledge to identify other grant opportunities to advance implementation of projects not covered by the SS4A grant. Working with USDOT to obligate funding can take several months, so securing additional, non-federal dollars may allow us to begin implementation sooner.
Vision Zero is the heart of SDOT’s work to make our streets safer and aligns with our core values. With Vision Zero, the Transportation Equity Framework, and the City’s sustainability goals, Seattle can move toward a more equitable and sustainable transportation system. Vision Zero is part of an international movement, shifting the approach to traffic safety to focus on the most effective ways to reduce harm while creating a culture of care and dignity for all travelers.

Our safety investments must be data-driven and community-informed to put our limited resources to their best use. For this review, a small team of SDOT staff who are not part of the Vision Zero team studied existing documentation and reports, interviewed dozens of subject matter experts within SDOT and partner agency staff, and identified challenges and opportunities with existing programs and projects. They drew on the SDOT Vision Zero program’s extensive research and peer agency experiences across the country on the effectiveness of safety interventions and countermeasures.

Reviewers also considered a significant amount of public feedback from many project and program activities to collect thoughts, suggestions, and opinions from the community regarding safety.

Defining Crashes

A crash means a collision while people are traveling. This can include 2 people driving colliding with one another, a person driving hitting a pedestrian, a person driving hitting a person biking or scooting, or a person traveling hitting another object such as a tree, power pole, or parked car. For purposes of our Vision Zero program, we track all crashes resulting in death or serious injuries on city streets. We also monitor crashes that don’t result in death or serious injuries as part of our citywide traffic monitoring and operations work.
Seattle’s streets see more than 10,000 crashes a year, with an average of 28 people losing their lives and 180 people seriously injured. Over the past few years, we’ve made measurable reductions in the frequency and severity of crashes at locations we have improved (see call out boxes for examples). However, despite these and other efforts, deaths and serious injuries on Seattle streets trended upward in 2020, 2021, and 2022. In particular, pedestrian fatalities have been on an upward trend.

Cities across the nation are seeing similar trends since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in 2021, traffic deaths nationally increased about 10.5 percent from 2020. In 2020, although people drove less, the frequency of severe crashes in many jurisdictions increased. The pandemic alone did not cause an increase in serious and fatal crashes but the upward trend in frequency of severe crashes is concerning.

Vision Zero focuses on crashes resulting in death or serious injury as determined by the responding officer and does not focus on minor crashes. Over the past few years, staff have collected and analyzed a large amount of data to guide safety decisions.

Our analysis of this data shows the following:

- More crashes – especially serious and fatal crashes – occur on arterials [major roads that carry large volumes of traffic] than on neighborhood streets.
- 93 percent of pedestrian deaths occur on arterials, and 80 percent are on arterials with more than 1 lane in each direction.
- The top contributing factors to pedestrian-involved crashes are high speeds and failure to yield to pedestrians.
- 80 percent of people killed while biking were riding where no bike facility was available.
Safety Treatment: Leading Pedestrian Intervals (LPIs)

Failure to yield to pedestrians is one of the leading causes of crashes in Seattle. At traffic signals, incidents involving vehicle drivers turning account for 35 percent of all pedestrian-involved crashes citywide. At over 50 percent of our signalized intersections, we’ve installed a treatment to give pedestrians a head start to reduce crashes. It turns on the walk signal 3-7 seconds before people driving get the green light. Doing so offers pedestrians a lead, prioritizing them and making them more visible. Making these smaller changes throughout the system adds up. At locations where LPIs were installed between 2009 and 2018, we’ve seen a 48 percent reduction in turning crashes involving pedestrians and a 34 percent reduction in serious injury and fatal pedestrian crashes.
2015-2021
Serious Injuries and Deaths

Deaths
- Person walking
- Person biking
- Person in vehicle

Serious Injuries
- Person walking
- Person biking
- Person in vehicle

Higher Risk Communities*
- Lowest
- Second lowest
- Middle
- Second highest
- Highest

*Race & Social Equity Index at Seattle.gov.
Identifying who is the most vulnerable to traffic deaths and serious injuries also informs our priorities, street designs, and overall approach. Nationwide, crash, death, and injury rates diverge between people inside and outside vehicles, particularly as personal vehicle designs became safer for drivers and passengers. As Seattle trendlines illustrate, this is especially true for vulnerable travelers of all ages and abilities, such as people walking, biking, rolling, and people without homes.

Data analysis also shows people are disproportionately more likely to be killed in the areas rated the most disadvantaged. These trends confirm the effects of long-standing national policies and priorities favoring personal driving over pedestrians and public transportation modes and the consequences of larger and more powerful cars and trucks on our streets. Undoing a century of car-focused street design related to land use planning decisions and red-lining are perhaps SDOT’s greatest challenge.

The Racial and Social Equity Index created by the Office of Planning and Community Development combines information on race, ethnicity, and related demographics with data on socioeconomic and health disadvantages to identify where priority populations make up relatively large proportions of neighborhood residents. When traffic data is overlaid, it becomes clear that people of color and those with lower access to opportunities are the most impacted by crashes. The volumes of crashes correlate with more multi-lane arterials miles in these locations.

DATA LIMITATIONS
We rely heavily on Seattle Police Department crash reports to track serious injuries and death on our streets. Doing so overlooks incidents not reported to the police and, therefore, likely undercounts crashes and injuries. Police reports are based on information available to responding officers and through witness statements after an incident has occurred. We do not systematically track near-misses, though people sometimes report such incidents to SDOT.
Safety Treatment: Reconfiguring Lanes on Arterials

Data analysis shows that almost all pedestrian deaths happen on arterials, particularly those with multiple lanes. One safety treatment is to analyze a street and see if reconfiguring lanes could improve safety and keep people and goods moving. Doing so removes what is known as a multiple threat, where a person driving stops for a crossing pedestrian but obscures the view from another driver approaching in the adjacent lane. If the second motorist does not slow down, it creates the potential for the pedestrian to step out in front of a moving car. Reduction of lanes also can slow speeds bringing them closer to the posted speed limit. Sometimes when we change street operations, we create space to include low-carbon travel options like bus or bike lanes supporting our sustainability goals.

This type of treatment has been successful enough that, to date, 54 locations citywide have received it. Here are some sample outcomes. On Nickerson Street, where in 2010 travel lanes were reconfigured, collisions dropped by 23 percent in the first year and in 2011, reconfiguration of Dexter Avenue saw collisions fall by 19 percent when reviewed in 2013. On Rainier Ave S from S Kenny St to S Henderson St, before (2017-2019, 3 years annualized) and after (2021-2022, 2 years annualized) we found a 42 percent reduction in total crashes and 13 percent reduction in serious injuries (no fatal crashes). Note traffic volumes and patterns also changed significantly during the 2021 and 2022 time period.
The programs and projects that SDOT implements come from many sources—through efforts such as the Pedestrian Master Plan, Bicycle Master Plan, Safe Routes to School, Transit Master Plan, and of course, Vision Zero. Other opportunities manifest through our capital project development. These projects can either be delivered by SDOT crews or, with larger projects, through contractors. During the design process, SDOT considers what type of Vision Zero treatments to include in the projects. The treatments focus on getting people to drive at safer speeds and reducing or eliminating conflicts between people using the public right-of-way. While not an exhaustive list, treatments to enhance safety can include:

- Redesigning arterial streets to create safer speeds, including reducing the number of travel lanes
- Implementing leading pedestrian intervals, giving people crossing at signalized intersections a head start
- Implementing “no turn on red” restrictions at traffic signals
- Enhancing pedestrian crossings with marked crosswalks, signs, flashing beacons, and refuge islands
- Increasing visibility at intersections by installing curb bulbs, No Parking signs, or traffic delineators such as plastic posts
- Building and repairing sidewalks and pedestrian paths
- Building protected bike lanes
- Adding speed humps
Safety Treatment: Program to reduce speed limits to 25 MPH

Slower driving speeds reduce the likelihood of crashes and significantly reduce the risk of death or serious injuries if crashes do occur. With this in mind, starting in 2020, we lowered the speed limit on most major streets in Seattle to 25 MPH and installed nearly 2,500 new speed limit signs to notify drivers of the lower speed limit, covering nearly 415 miles of arterial city streets. In other areas, like smaller residential streets and school zones, the speed limit is 20 MPH.

We conducted case studies in five Seattle neighborhoods to learn about the effect of lowering speed limits on safety. The data showed that lowering speed limits and increasing sign density alone – without any marketing campaigns, additional enforcement, re-timed signals, or engineering changes to the street – resulted in lower speeds and fewer crashes. Data from 2018 to 2019 showed a 20 – 40 percent drop in the number of crashes in locations with new 25 MPH speed limit signs in study areas. You can read more about the 25 MPH speed limit effort in this blog post.

Field of vision at 15 MPH

Field of vision at 30 to 40 MPH
THE CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING VISION ZERO

Coming back to the purpose of the Top-to-Bottom review, data analysis and community input provided through existing projects are not the only categories considered. Internal challenges to implementing Vision Zero projects were also identified.

DECISION-MAKING
Analysis of SDOT’s programs and staff interviews indicated that both crew-delivered and contractor-delivered capital projects have challenges with timelines. Project review and decision-making processes slow project delivery that would support progress toward Vision Zero. The process and authority for decision-making are not always straightforward. For example, adding Vision Zero treatments to pipeline projects can introduce new steps or questions which add to project complexity. Even though slower vehicle speeds can be a component of Vision Zero progress on some streets, decision-making around slowing people driving cars and trucks can be complicated. Competing community priorities can challenge leadership decision-making within SDOT and across City departments and offices. This can contribute to slower progress and increase the likelihood of defaulting to what has been approved and done before to maintain project delivery commitments.

COSTS
Project development, design, delivery, and construction management are labor-intensive and are a significant portion of project costs, particularly for smaller-scale or scattered-site improvements. Smaller-scale improvements delivered systemwide can make meaningful Vision Zero impacts, as with LPIs and vehicle speed limit reduction. For smaller-scale improvements, the efficiency of decision-making and project delivery is critical to controlling costs. As mentioned above, pursuing Vision Zero treatments as part of non-Vision Zero projects may require decision-making that adds time and associated costs for small or large-scale projects.

FUNDING
Some of the Top-to-Bottom Review recommendations can be accomplished in the near-term. For example, SDOT can estimate the resources needed to complete implementation of Leading Pedestrian Intervals (LPI) and recommend the final scope, schedule, and budget for systemwide implementation. And we can continue using operational funds to implement LPIs at intersections where the technology to do so already exists. However, in the long-term, full systemwide implementation would require additional investments in signal equipment that can operate LPIs and thus additional funding.

Also, when adequate funding is unavailable to implement Vision Zero treatments as part of a current capital project, there is no consistent mechanism to capture recommendations and plan for future incorporation along the corridor or at the location. In some cases, SDOT has phased improvements by implementing lower-cost improvements first and planning for upgrades over time. However, it is essential to make plans for future additional improvements after lower-cost improvements are installed. An example is the replacement of plastic poles delineating bike lanes or painted curb bulbs with hardened infrastructure. Although SDOT is currently experimenting with replacing existing plastic infrastructure with hardened infrastructure, the work is only in the pilot phase.
INVESTMENT TO REACH VISION ZERO

As we align with the USDOT-endorsed Safe System Approach of shifting from a conventional safety approach to focusing on both human mistakes AND human vulnerability and designing a system with many redundancies, we’ll consider how to impact the five interrelated components necessary for achieving Vision Zero.

When looking at the five components, SDOT can primarily influence two: Safer Speeds and Safer Roads. As a result, the amount of investment by SDOT necessary to make progress on Vision Zero is only part of the solution. Further Vision Zero progress requires investments and behavioral change from travelers (Safer People); policy changes at the state and federal level (Safer Vehicles); and evolution of emergency response, forensic analysis, and incident management techniques (Post Crash Care). Implementation of SDOT’s Transportation Equity Framework tactics encourages us to stretch beyond our typical sphere of influence and to work with our agency partners to make progress on the other three components to improve safety on our streets as well. This work takes funding and a commitment at all levels to prioritize safety over vehicle speeds.

FUNDING VISION ZERO
SDOT invests in Vision Zero through a combination of dedicated Vision Zero program funding, as well as by incorporating Vision Zero and safe system principles into other projects. Therefore, it isn’t easy to disaggregate the portion of projects that are contributing to Vision Zero. A relatively small part of our annual budget is specifically for the Vision Zero program. For example, we budgeted $2 million to $4.5 million per year from 2015-2021, which increased to $8.3 million in 2023 and $8.6 million in 2024. This funding is used for specific stand-alone treatments and as contributions to add Vision Zero scope to projects like large paving projects that are not budgeted to include desired safety treatments and can also be used as leverage for grants. For example, SDOT will be leveraging some of the Vision Zero dollars as match for the 2023 USDOT Safe Streets and Roads Grant for $25.6 million.

Other Vision Zero projects come from many sources—through programs such as the Pedestrian Master Plan (start on page 10), Bicycle Master Plan, Safe Routes to School, Transit Master Plan, and Freight Master Plan. Grants for these programs often include improvements that contribute to safety and can also utilize dedicated Vision Zero funds as a match.
Finally, through ongoing management of our transportation system, safety treatments are added to the public right-of-way. These include but are not limited to operational changes to signal timing, installation of new or replaced signs, and refreshing striping. Continued investment in management and maintenance is an important part of continuing to increase safety for all modes on the street.

**NEAR-TERM OPPORTUNITIES TO INFORM FUNDING**

**Seattle Transportation Plan:** SDOT has opportunities to advance Vision Zero through the Seattle Transportation Plan (STP) currently in progress and the scheduled update to the Vision Zero Action Plan this year. These longer-term efforts can provide policy guidance and implementation strategies that can be incorporated into future funding plans and budget processes with the right prioritization.

**Early Complete Streets Review:** Another opportunity is to re-evaluate SDOT’s project development process so that maintenance efforts, such as large paving projects, can go through a complete streets review. Adding this step would provide a clearer picture of what future costs need to be planned for and to develop options and funding strategies to meet those needs. This action would build Vision Zero treatment costs into maintenance and large paving project funding requests, improving safety, and reducing decision-making time. Many of this review’s recommendations focus on this next phase of work, such as planning for broader or systemwide implementation of improvements.

**STAYING TRUE TO OUR VALUES**

Vision Zero is the center of SDOT’s work to make our streets safer and aligns with other SDOT core values— to make Seattle more equitable, sustainable, and climate-friendly. The goal is to have Vision Zero not be a separate competing priority but integrated into all aspects of SDOT projects and programs—from development to maintenance.
Implementing the robust suite of recommended actions to improve traveler safety in Seattle won’t happen overnight. The recommendations place a renewed focus on efforts to advance Vision Zero and are intended to provide important input into SDOT’s upcoming Vision Zero Action Plan scheduled for completion in 2023. The recommendations should also inform budget processes and organizational planning to improve overall alignment with Vision Zero. However, the top-to-bottom review has specific recommendations in the near-term, mid-term, and long-term that we are committed to implementing.

**NEAR-TERM (2023)**

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# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE IMPLEMENTATION

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<td>1. Be willing to reduce vehicle travel speeds to improve safety</td>
<td>Decision-making &amp; funding</td>
<td>Release Vision Zero Action Plan</td>
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<td>2. Implement iterative, ongoing improvements to our infrastructure</td>
<td>Cost &amp; Funding</td>
<td>Even smaller-scale improvements can significantly affect safety and user experience. For instance, in 2022, we launched the Even Better Bike Lane pilot program to install stronger, more permanent barriers to existing protected bike lanes that would be more resistant to weather and traffic than typical barriers such as plastic posts.</td>
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<td>3. Accelerate planning for broader or systemwide implementation of proven interventions</td>
<td>Decision-making &amp; funding</td>
<td>We’ll continue to identify and prioritize systemwide upgrades that are proven to benefit traveler safety, such as LPIs. We’re also want to accelerate and deliver safety improvements early in projects and not wait until completion – an example is the Beacon Hill Bike Route project, where we plan to deliver crew-led safety upgrades early for people biking, walking, and rolling.</td>
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<td>4. Strengthen and resource SDOT’s Vision Zero core and matrix teams</td>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>Continue to seek funding for staffing resources to bolster the core Vision Zero team and staff across all SDOT divisions that contribute to safety efforts.</td>
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## ONGOING RECOMMENDATIONS

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<td>1. Secure funding to incorporate Vision Zero improvements in all projects and for asset maintenance</td>
<td>Cost &amp; Funding</td>
<td>In line with the above details regarding funding, we will continue to elevate and prioritize Vision Zero safety improvements in our projects and maintenance as more tools and intervention methods are identified and advanced. We will keep this in our budget development process as a top priority.</td>
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<td>2. Continue building support and fostering a culture of shared responsibility for Vision Zero with our elected representatives</td>
<td>Decision-making &amp; funding</td>
<td>Cities that have been most successful in implementing Vision Zero safety enhancements benefit from visible and vocal support from elected officials for the tough decisions needed to prioritize safety over speed. Additionally, we are growing skills throughout the department, including at the senior team level and through a staff-level intradepartmental team to include Vision Zero as part of our thinking and work plans.</td>
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<td>3. Improve SDOT’s customer service response process</td>
<td>Decision-making &amp; funding</td>
<td>When customers or constituents flag safety concerns or issues in the public right-of-way, we prioritize evaluating concerns and filing analysis for future reference. Concerns need to be forwarded promptly to project or program managers who understand what resources are available, prioritization methods, and possible treatments, or SDOT needs to analyze and identify plans to address concerns or communicate clearly why a concern cannot be addressed, or when it potentially could.</td>
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<td>4. Be champions for Vision Zero as we engage with WSDOT, the Port of Seattle, transit partners, the state legislature, and other organizations</td>
<td>Decision-making &amp; funding</td>
<td>Regularly coordinate with partner agencies and organizations in meetings, forums, and channels to prioritize leveraging resources to co-implement safety measures in projects and programs to reach the best results for the traveling public.</td>
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The complete Vision Zero Top-to-Bottom Review goes deeper into the findings and recommendations.
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Through public engagement, we hope to continue raising awareness of Vision Zero and ultimately reduce the number of serious injuries and fatalities on Seattle streets. We will present the findings of this review to the City Council Transportation and Public Utilities Committee and have a conversation with our transportation advisory board members to hear their feedback.

We’d also like to know what highlights and takeaways inspire and are thought-provoking to people outside the department. Community members are encouraged to attend board meetings and use these public conversations to share their thoughts. A short public feedback form will also be available for the same duration to accept comments from the public.

As part of our commitment to being accountable and transparent, SDOT plans an update in 2024 on how it is using the recommendations.
VISION 0
SAFER STREETS FOR SEATTLE