OPINION AND COMMENTARY

Editorials and other Opinion content offer perspectives on issues important to our community and are independent from the work of our newsroom reporters.

OPINION

Wrong-way crashes have spiked in North Carolina. Fixes may be on the way

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

NOVEMBER 27, 2022 5:30 AM

Signs warn motorists not to enter the Interstate 40 exit ramp at Jones Sausage Road in Raleigh, near where two people were killed in a wrong-way crash on the interstate in July 2012. TAKAAKI IWABU *tiwabu@newsobserver.com*

It's the most terrifying sight on a highway: a vehicle coming at you traveling the wrong way.

Wrong-way crashes are rare, but it hasn't seemed that way this month: On Nov. 5, a wrong-way driver died on I-540 in Raleigh; Nov. 8, four died on I-85 in Kannapolis; on Nov. 13, four died on the U.S. 70 Bypass in Wayne County; on Nov. 15, two died on I-440 in Raleigh; on Nov. 20, one died on I-40 in Alamance County.

According to a 2021 NCDOT report, wrong-way crashes made up only 0.2% of all freeway collisions, but they accounted for 5.6% of fatalities across the state. A 2018 report on such crashes by the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center found that, "These crashes typically result in serious injuries or fatalities, with associated costs to society ranging from $564,000 to $10 million per crash."

Given today's automobile navigation and safety technology, advances in highway design and a general decline in drunken driving arrests and fatalities, it's confounding that such crashes are not only still occurring, but are increasing.

On North Carolina freeways in 2017, there were 49 wrong-way crashes resulting 19 fatalities and 59 injuries. Last year, there were 66 such crashes with 18 fatalities and 76 injuries. Deaths from wrong-way crashes average about 12 annually. So far in November alone, there have been at least 12.

Indeed, the number of crashes doesn't tell the whole story. Not all wrong-way driving ends in collisions. Incidences of cars entering a highway on an exit ramp happen more often than you might think.

The North Carolina Turnpike Authority (NCTA) studied the Monroe Expressway near Charlotte, the state's newest all-electronic toll road, to test wrong-way driver detection and notification systems. The study found a surprisingly high instance of drivers entering an exit ramp before quickly correcting their error.

"A lot of vehicles would go the wrong way up the ramp and turn around," said Brian Mayhew, a NCDOT traffic engineer. "That's not data that historically we have had available to us."

On Nov. 7, the NCDOT invited contractors to submit information about possible components of a wrong-way driver detection and prevention system. The deadline for submissions is Jan. 13, 2023.

The common explanation for wrong-way crashes is people driving while impaired. Alcohol is involved in about half of the incidents, but that also means about half do not involve alcohol.

CAUSES ELUSIVE

The cause of these crashes is not well understood. Alcohol and older drivers are factors, but so are highway design, lighting and signage. These situations are different from most crashes because they tend to occur when traffic is lightest and the driver is alone. It's not always possible to track how the driver got going the wrong way.

Even when a wrong way-driver is detected, usually by other motorists making 911 calls, it still takes time for police to reach and stop the vehicle. Sometimes they are too late.

Once NCDOT is done collecting data on wrong-way crashes, Mayhew said the department will look at monitoring technology and perhaps adjusting road designs. "The more we understand about the problem, the more we will be able to understand what types of technology are best," he said.

Finding a way to prevent a dangerous highway situation that arises from multiple causes will likely involve costly changes. "It's something we know is going to be

expensive," Mayhew said. "So we want to be strategic about it."

Highway changes are years away, but advances in automobile technology may be closer. Self-driving technology is evolving quickly. Many new cars are designed to stop before contact even if a driver is distracted. GPS monitoring could flag wrong-way drivers to police. Smart highways could correct a driver's worst error.

To reduce and ultimately end the terror of wrong-way drivers, the future of automobiles and highways needs to arrive fast.

BEHIND OUR REPORTING

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OPINION

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BY NED BARNETT

NOVEMBER 28, 2022 5:30 AM

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UPDATED NOVEMBER 27, 2022 2:04 PM

Cost of Triangle commuter rail swells by $1 billion ahead of crucial period

By Lauren Ohnesorge – Senior Staff Writer, Triangle Business Journal

Dec 5, 2022

Officials, politicians and business leaders agree that 2023 will be a key year for the Triangle commuter rail plan, an effort that's now estimated to cost a billion dollars more than a price tag outlined two years ago.

The plan comes down to how much Triangle leaders and taxpayers are willing to spend. But officials say concerns over the project's cost are amplified by the sting of the failed light rail project, where $157 million was spent with no results.

Next year is when the public will be able to submit comments on how commuter rail – which differs from light rail by having fewer stops and room for more passengers – will shape out. Due to the rising price tag, it's unlikely the region will be able to implement the full vision outlined in 2020 – a 40-mile line within an existing rail corridor that could run from western Durham to Clayton.

Prior to a recent study, GoTriangle estimated its commuter rail plan would cost between $1.8 billion and $2.1 billion. "We thought that was conservative," said Charles Latucca, president and CEO of GoTriangle. However, flash forward to today, and inflationary pressures and requirements from railroads upped the price tag in that study, he said.

"It came out to be a billion more than we anticipated. So the question then becomes, okay, if it's more money than we anticipated, what do we do?" Latucca said. "What can we do?"

With a rising price tag, GoTriangle is evaluating its options. It's sliced the corridor into three chunks, with plans to take the options to the public in January.

The eastern option would cost between $600 million and $700 million. The west Durham to Research Triangle Park option would be about $1.5 billion. But it's the middle chunk – from central Raleigh to just past RTP, at a price tag of between $800 million and $1 billion, that's getting the most attention politically, he said.

"Any one of these options would be affordable under the amount of money we have today," Lattuca said, noting the agency would likely phase the project, "so we need to pick one of these options first."

The Raleigh to RTP option would be a good place to start, he said.

"It serves RTP, it serves Raleigh," he said, noting the tentative plan would be accomplishing other phases of the project after finalizing that middle tranche.

But it's extremely tentative. First, public comments have to be collected. After the first quarter of 2023, the plan is to take it to the GoTriangle board for a recommendation before approaching county commissioners. And, as the region learned from the failed Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit project, nothing is final until it's actually under construction.

In Durham, cautious optimism

In Durham, rail proponents have been burned before.

Plans for the 17.7-mile Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit line fizzled, despite the fact that more than $150 million was spent on the project. So Durham officials – both from the city and the county – are optimistic, but wary.

Wendy Jacobs, vice chair of the Durham County Board of Commissioners, said the need for "all types of transit options" is obvious as the region is growing. "We need to make sure that we have fixed-route, fast, efficient ways to get from one place to the other," she said. "Rail definitely needs to be one of those options."

She said passenger rail should be on the table. She called the commuter rail feasibility study results "concerning" because of the cost and other challenges, but said "that's why we did the study." The region learned from light rail that more research and assessment needs to happen up front, she said.

Mark-Anthony Middleton, mayor pro tempore of Durham, said equity needs to be "part of the lens." It needs to work for Durham residents, and not just be a plan for those outside of the metro to take advantage of its economic opportunities and then take the money elsewhere.

"We're mindful of the economic boom that it can bring to our area … we just want to make sure that all of our people get to participate," he said. Middleton thinks there's "appetite" on the City Council for serious discussion but admits it's likely to be informed by what happened with light rail.

"There's still a lot of sensitivities around that," he said.

A priority for Raleigh

For their part, newly elected and re-elected officials in Raleigh say commuter rail is still on their list of priorities, too.

Corey Branch, re-elected this month to the Raleigh City Council, said that "Raleigh having a robust transit system is key to housing affordability … so I think it is still a priority in moving our city forward."

Jane Harrison, Raleigh City Councilor-elect, said she is "excited" about the prospects for commuter rail and that now that the election is over, it's an issue she plans to delve into. Another newcomer to the City Council, Megan Patton, said she is excited to get "plugged into the commuter rail project."

"I ran on a platform of sustainability, and accelerating projects that get cars off the road will be an essential part of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and meeting our climate goals," Patton said.

Ongoing need

Joe Milazzo, who heads the Regional Transportation Alliance business coalition, said that tackling growth – including traffic congestion – is an issue that is critical "independent of electoral outcomes at any level of government."

He said the business community says commuter rail – coupled with other solutions such as Raleigh's first Bus Rapid Transit line (which is just months away from construction) – is part of the solution and needs to be put in place sooner rather than later.

"Our regional community must prioritize inclusive prosperity and housing affordability, and targeted, accelerated mobility investments are a vital part of that," Milazzo said.

The need is there, Lattuca said. GoTriangle's survey saw ridership was more robust than officials had anticipated. Instead of the 7,000 to 10,000 riders it had projected, the survey showed a need to accommodate between 12,000 and 18,000 commuters.

"Our feasibility study is showing there's a good demand for the service, it's a question of what we can afford," Lattuca said. "Getting that feedback will be very important."

ORANGE COUNTY

Garden views, public spaces. Here's a first look at Hillsborough's Amtrak station.

BY TAMMY GRUBB

NOVEMBER 29, 2022 8:06 AM

Ride along on the Piedmont train from Durham to Greensboro and back. The Piedmont, the Amtrak passenger train owned by the state of North Carolina, runs daily between Raleigh and Charlotte, with seven stops in between. BY ANGELINA KATSANIS

A train station coming to Hillsborough could become a modern commuter hub and civic center, integrated into the natural landscape, with a bus stop and public spaces within an easy walk to downtown, project officials said Monday night.

The station, near the Collins Ridge subdivision at Churton and Orange Grove streets, is the first phase of a 20-acre town-planned development. The site now is mostly undeveloped, except for the Hillsborough Youth Athletic Association baseball fields.

While details are still being worked out, the project's first phase will add an 8,000-square-foot, single-story building, a dropoff area and parking where the field is today. One side would have a train station with a waiting area, covered patio and boarding platforms.

The other side could have town offices and an auditorium-size room for public meetings and events. Local art could hang on the lobby walls, said Stephanie Trueblood, the town's public space and sustainability manager.

An elevated greenway north across the railroad tracks and south through the Collins Ridge neighborhood would create a pedestrian link from downtown to Cates Creek Park, near the Waterstone neighborhood.

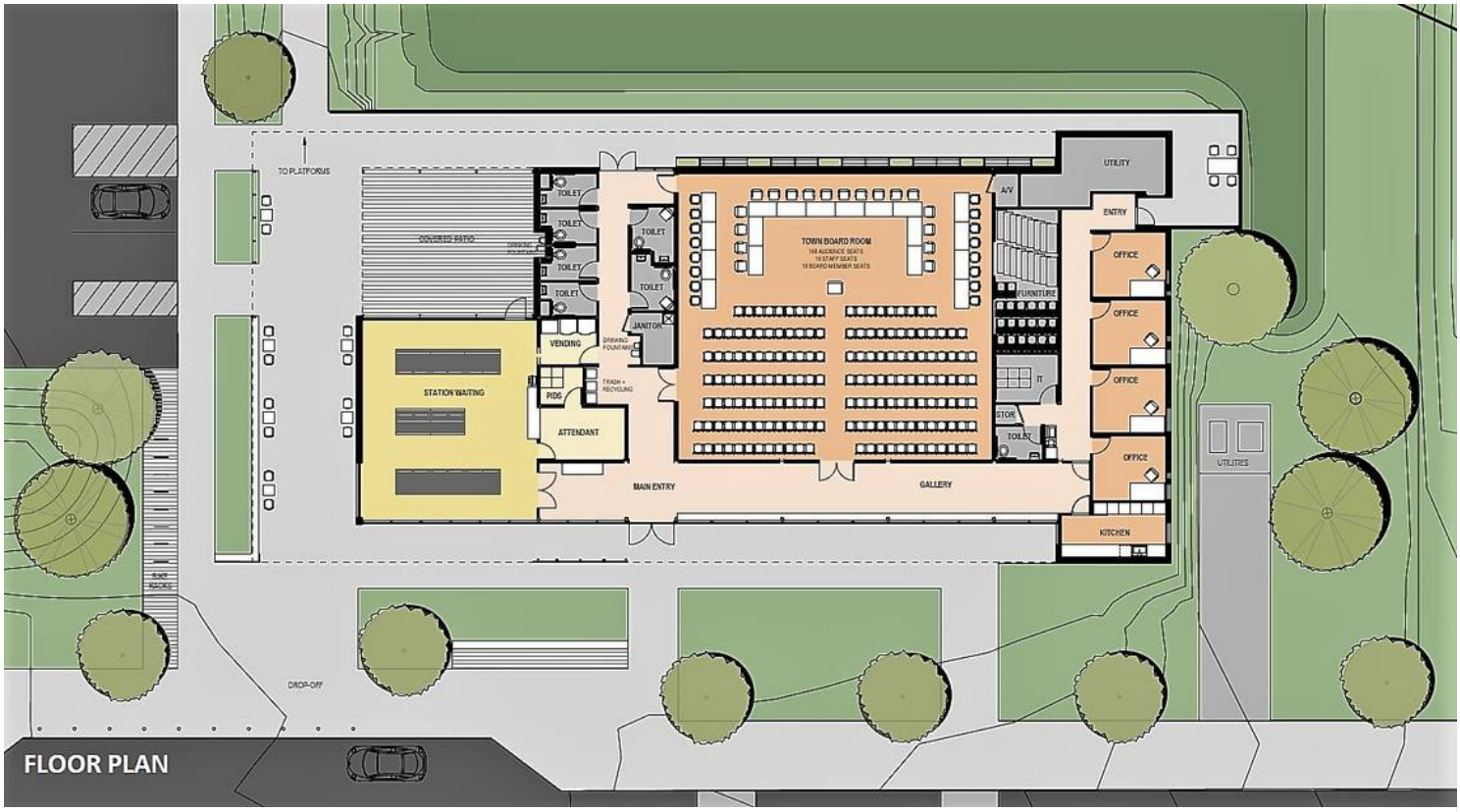
An architect's rendering shows how an Amtrak train station near Orange Grove and Churton streets could look as viewed from a proposed greenway across the railroad tracks to downtown Hillsborough. Clearscapes *Contributed*

"I"m really hoping that the train station becomes a destination, not just for people who are coming to visit the staff that's located in the building or the station itself," Trueblood said. "It's a place where people can get off the greenway and use the bathroom. It's a place where people can meet their knitting club and sit outside."

Environmental sustainability is central to that concept, project officials said, from natural daylighting to renewable energy, a green roof, and a stormwater pond, swales and wetlands.

The site's 40-foot change in elevation makes the topography "challenging" but also "quite wonderful," said Eric Davis, landscape architect and vice president of Surface 678. The company is working with architects at Clearscapes to design the station.

"We want to make sure that everyone has access to the site," Davis said. "But the wonderful thing about this is it provides opportunities to integrate stormwater features and to also really accent the site in terms of key views and sightlines."



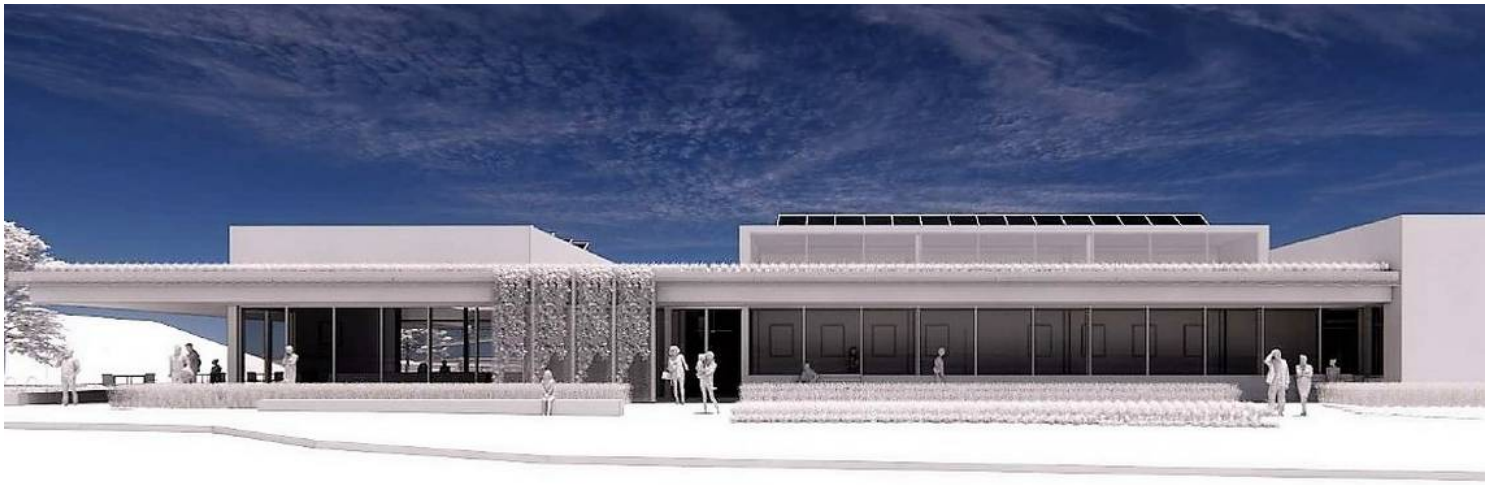
The draft floor plan for an Amtrak train station in Hillsborough includes ticket, office and waiting areas for rail passengers, but also shows a future town board room with seating for over 200 people and smaller public meeting spaces. Clearscapes *Contributed*

PROJECT FEEDBACK, RISING COST

On Monday, the town's Board of Commissioners applauded the first draft of architectural and landscape designs for the 6.4-acre Amtrak station, a key piece of Orange County's local and regional transit plan.

"I'm blown away," Commissioner Kathleen Ferguson said. Others shared her perspective, including Commissioner Robb English, who praised "the innovation that you're showing in ... demonstrating how green a building can be built."

It's "super exciting," Mayor Jennifer Weaver said. "I know it's not exactly the precise rendering, but just the elements you're bringing in and the spirit of this modern, sustainable building is really exciting."



An architect's vision of the entrance to Hillsborough's future Amtrak train station off Churton and Orange Grove streets. Clearscapes *Contributed*

The cost to build the station is estimated at $8.1 million but could go up as the plan is completed, Town Manager Eric Peterson said.

The N.C. Department of Transportation agreed in 2020 to pay roughly $6.3 million toward the station's construction, with GoTriangle paying $686,000 from Orange County's transit revenues. The town has agreed to pay the rest and complete the project by 2027, barring a state extension.

NC RAILROAD DEAL, MORE PLANNING

One of the biggest hurdles to moving forward is an agreement with the North Carolina Railroad, which owns the tracks and the land on both sides of the corridor, Trueblood said. That will clear the way for surveys to position the platforms where needed and complete the station design.

A proposed train station and civic building could occupy roughly six acres on the 20-acre site. Town officials could decide in the future how to best use the remaining land. Clearscapes *Contributed*

The work also will account for more tracks in the corridor to accommodate more trains, she said, and for the utilities that will be needed to serve boththe rail station, and all of the town's future development plans.

Planning for the remaining 14 acres will start next year, Trueblood told the board. Previous discussions have included affordable housing and retail space to a performance center.

The town might need to complete a market analysis and look at other options, Trueblood said, including whether to seek a public-private partnership or sell some of the land to a developer.

In These Cities, Car-Free Streets Are Here To Stay

Cars? In this economy? Here's how four cities took back miles of pavement from cars, making a popular pandemic solution into a permanent fixture.

MAYLIN TU NOVEMBER 21, 2022

In San Francisco, JFK Promenade is now awash with bikers, pedestrians and cultural activities. (Photo by btwashburn /

What happens when you close down a city street to cars? More people do non-driving things, like walking, biking, strolling, skating and frolicking in the space normally reserved for motor vehicles. Car-free advocates would say that as greenhouse gas emissions and traffic violence go down, happiness and connection go up — it's hard to connect with your neighbors while ensconced in two tons of steel.

Despite the benefits, closing streets to cars can make some people, er — a bit upset. Opponents argue that businesses will suffer (despite evidence to the contrary), congestion will increase (not so, says CityLab) and disabled and elderly people will have less access to public space (there's a column for that). Like any change that pushes back against car culture, car-free streets face significant challenges.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, cities around the world closed down streets to cars and opened them up for people. Over two years later, some of these experiments were so popular that they are here to stay. Here are four car-free streets that are still going strong or just getting started.

John F. Kennedy Drive in San Francisco

The people of San Francisco have spoken: Keep JFK Drive car-free. Historically, JFK Drive (now known as JFK Promenade) has been closed to cars on Sundays since 1967. When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down most of the city and put a premium on outdoor space for socially-distanced play, it made sense to keep the street car-free seven days a week.

As anyone who has biked, skated or rolled during an open streets event can attest — once you go car-free it's extremely hard to go back. Making JFK Drive car-free not only increased walking and biking, it turned the street into a space for art, music, celebration and connection.

In April, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed a motion keeping JFK Drive closed to cars, along with 40 improvements that would make the park more accessible to disabled people, seniors and others.

The 1.5 mile street in San Francisco's famed Golden Gate State Park was then the subject of dueling ballot measures this month — Prop J would keep cars out and Prop I would reopen the street to motorized vehicles. Supporters of Prop I argued that permanently closing the drive to cars would exclude people with disabilities from accessing the park. In the end, voters passed Prop J with almost 60% voting "yes" and rejected Prop I with over 60% voting "no."

Jodie Medeiros, who leads the pedestrian advocacy group Walk San Francisco, says car-free movement at JFK is critical to protecting pedestrians from vehicle traffic. "For two years, we have seen how much people not only love but really need this car-free space," she told the San Francisco Chronicle. "Car-free JFK is all about our safety."

According to San Francisco Recreation and Parks, visits to the park increased 36% since the closure, totalling nearly 7 million visits, while over 90% of the streets in the park are still open to cars.

Griffith Park Drive in Los Angeles

It started with tragedy: On April 16, 77-year-old Andrew Jelmart was riding his bike through Griffith Park when he was struck and killed by a speeding driver. While the park is a popular spot for hiking, biking and horse-riding with over 50-miles of trails, cars often use it as a shortcut to avoid adjacent freeways. Los Angeles has long been known for its car-centric culture, but Jelmart's death sparked a movement to make at least part of Griffith Park Drive car-free.

It might seem like a no-brainer that parks should be for recreation, rather than for drivers trying to get from point A to point B faster, but the tragic death of a cyclist drove the point home. By the end of June, the park announced it was temporarily shutting a stretch of Griffith Park Drive to cars. By Aug. 18, the change was made permanent.

As mobility advocates and writers have pointed out, most of the park is still open to cars — the section of Griffith Park Drive that is newly car-free is less than a mile long. However, city officials estimate that the closure keeps about 2,000 cars per day from cutting through the park, making it safer for people walking and rolling.

The city of L.A. has rarely moved this quickly to implement safety improvements for people outside of cars, even in the face of tragedy. In this case, it helped that the Department of Recreation and Parks has sole jurisdiction over Griffith Park Avenue, avoiding some of the public pushback that projects like this often face. In addition to the closure, the park has also announced new plans to curb speeding, calm traffic and improve cycling infrastructure.

34th Ave in New York City

Although not shut down to cars 24/7, one of the most successful car-free street projects is 34th Avenue (now known as "Paseo Park") in the Jackson Heights neighborhood of Queens, New York City. Currently, the street is car-free every day between 7 a.m. and 8 p.m, turning 26 city blocks into a de facto public park. With the newfound space, the neighborhood hosts a myriad of cultural activities, including yoga, dance, gardening, ESL classes and arts and crafts for kids.

Started in the early days of the pandemic, the 34th Avenue open street project was organized as part of New York City's Open Streets initiative. Volunteers from the neighborhood put out traffic barriers every morning and started organizing events, activities and games. This year, only 20 miles of open streets remain in the city, down from a high of 83 miles.

The city's department of transportation says that the project has reduced traffic violence involving pedestrians by a whopping 41.7%. A study conducted by Streetsblog showed a dramatic reduction in all car crashes.

Although the project has sparked controversy in recent months, 34th Avenue is a testament to community organizing and the possibilities of a street centered on people, not cars.

Capel Street in Dublin

Capel Street is a popular retail and restaurant district in Dublin that went car-less in May, making it the longest car-free street in the country — but not without some pushback.

On the face of it, the street – since named one of Time Out's coolest streets in the world – seems perfect for pedestrianization. Capel is home to such TikTok-famous eateries as Krewe, Bovinity and a secret Asian street food restaurant hidden in the back of a supermarket.A new report out of New York City has found that far from hurting restaurants, car-free streets actually increased business

for restaurants enrolled in the Open Streets program. They saw a 19% increase in revenue over previous years, or almost $6 million total during summer 2021.

Capel Street's car-free journey started gradually, with more space on the street dedicated to outdoor dining during the pandemic. Then, last year, Dublin piloted a program shutting down the street to cars during weekend evening hours for 17 weeks. A public outreach survey found that almost 90% of respondents supported making Capel Street traffic-free, saying that it "improved their experience" of the street. While some businesses were opposed to the idea, Dublin city councilors voted this month to keep the street closed to motor vehicles.

Before the Pandemic

Even before the threat of a highly-infectious airborne virus pushed cities to begin getting serious about outdoor dining and pedestrianized streets, some cities were already working toward implementing car-free zones in their city centers. In Paris, air and noise pollution pushed Mayor Anne Hidalgo to institute several car-free days beginning in 2015. Reports by the Airparif association, which measures urban pollution levels, suggest that nitrogen dioxide levels fell by nearly a third on the Champs-Élysées, by as much as 40% along the Seine, and about 20% at the Place de l'Opéra, during a car-free day in September 2015. Now, the city plans to ban private vehicles from the city's historic center by 2024, ahead of the Paris Olympics.

The success of the occasional car-free days in Paris also inspired a movement in São Paulo, Brazil. In 2016, Mayor Fernando Haddad announced a ban on cars every Sunday along the city's iconic Paulista Avenue. The move has been welcomed, including by the local business owners who were initially skeptical: A 2019 study conducted by a group of local NGOs found that 86% of store owners supported the program. Indeed, many are encouraging the city to expand the ban to Saturday afternoons as well, to encourage more foot traffic and sales.

"With the closing for cars, people started to walk a lot more, to stroll around, and the sales on Sundays grew sevenfold," one local bookstore manager told Next City. "It was the best thing that could have happened for us. Sundays are now, by far, our busiest days."

Maylin Tu is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles. She grew up in Maine and Beijing, is proudly #carfree and might be addicted to her local Buy Nothing group.

FOLLOW MAYLIN

TAGS: CARS, BIKE SAFETY, PEDESTRIAN SAFETY

RECOMMENDED READS

Aysha Khan, Senior Editor

At Next City, we explore biking as a solution to the inequities and inaccessibility we face in cities. But we also examine solutions for cities seeking to make biking more equitable and accessible.

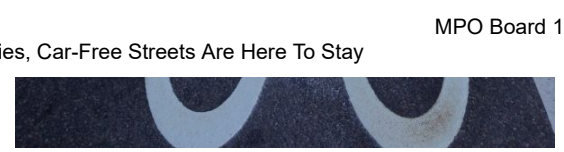
Should Cities Decriminalize Biking on Sidewalks?

How 7 Cities Got More People Biking

A Bicycle Is an Anti-Poverty Machine

Snow and the Walkable, Bikeable, Accessible City

How Five U.S. Cities Built 335 Miles of Bike Lanes in 24 Months



Why Is It So Hard to Get Across U.S. Cities Using Only Bike Lanes?

DEPARTMENT OF DATA

Roundabouts are (slowly!) eating the suburbs

Analysis by Andrew Van Dam
Staff writer | + Follow
November 25, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EST

A quiet roundabout revolution is sweeping America's suburbs. And it may have continued, unmeasured and unremarked, if not for Lee Rodegerdts.

It turns out the fine folks at the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics don't track the nation's roundabouts, rotaries or traffic circles. Indeed, no federal agency does. Instead, that weighty responsibility has, for a quarter of a century, fallen on the unassuming shoulders of Rodegerdts, an engineer and talented amateur photographer and pianist in Portland, Ore.

In the late 1990s, the Federal Highway Administration drafted the modest but stealthily hilarious Rodegerdts to write the book on roundabouts. The result was "Roundabouts: An Informational Guide." In the course of his research, Rodegerdts was surprised to discover that nobody was keeping track of the newfangled intersections mushrooming across the country.

So he started counting. And he kept counting, through another edition of the guide, through dozens of roundabout conferences and confabs, through roundabout research projects and through endless actual roundabout construction designs. His count soon migrated online, where he still spends his spare time combing through submissions from a small army of amateur roundabout enthusiasts, verifying new roundabouts and sussing out their construction dates using published reports and historical satellite photography.

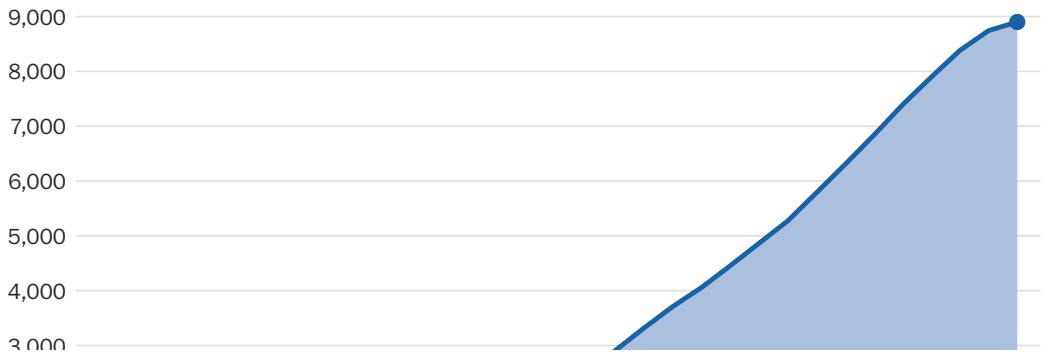
When Rodegerdts started, he counted about 300 roundabouts nationwide. Just 25 years later, he counts about 9,000. And that doesn't include 160-plus rotaries or 700-plus traffic-calming circles (which are very different from roundabouts).

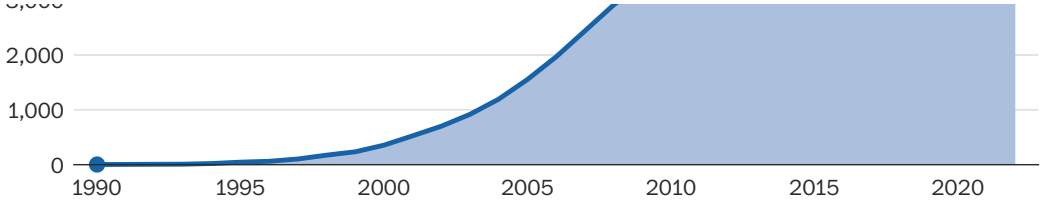
Compared with the hundreds of thousands of normal intersections peppering the American landscape, ruled by stop signs and traffic lights, roundabouts are rare beasts. But unlike the drivers they frequently confuse and bedevil, roundabouts are coming on fast.

"People doubted we could keep up," Rodegerdts told us. "But so far I think we have."

The rapid rise of the roundabout

Known roundabouts in the United States





Note: Data is current through Nov. 23 and includes true modern roundabouts, not pretenders such as rotaries traffic-calming circles; the apparent slowing growth rate in recent years probably just reflects the lag between when roundabouts are built and when they're added to the database.

Source: Lee Rodegerdts of Kittelson & Associates DEPARTMENT OF DATA / THE WASHINGTON

The modern roundabout relies on a geometric design that forces traffic to slow, plus a simple innovation born in 1960s Britain: the rule that people already in the circle get the right of way. In traditional rotaries and traffic circles, which still lurk in many East Coast cities, traffic moves faster and vehicles already in the circle often must yield to newcomers.

In the United States, the earliest roundabouts often were constructed in bigger cities. In general, our analysis shows, they're most likely to be built in well-educated, high-income towns. These days, the fastest growth is in suburbs and rural areas.

"It's very hard to fit roundabouts into our dense urban environment," Rodegerdts said. "And so most of the roundabouts have been going in, either in brand-new subdivisions or are retrofits of existing — often suburban or rural — intersections."

Why add a roundabout, you might ask. Because roundabouts offer impressive safety gains. In general, a roundabout will drive down fatal crashes by 90 percent and cut all car-crash injuries by at least 75 percent, even while accommodating a higher volume of cars.

At a rural two-way stop, the gains can be even more dramatic. A roundabout can slash all traffic injuries, both fatal and nonfatal, by almost 90 percent. After all, it's almost impossible to blow through a roundabout at 60 miles an hour and T-bone a minivan — an all-too-common occurrence in typical rural intersections.

"That's the beauty of the roundabout," Rodegerdts told us. "It's the geometry. It's the curves that are doing the work. And not relying on a traffic-control device as the sole thing keeping you from colliding at high speed."

So which state is the roundaboutiest? Florida boasts the most roundabouts, but it also has the third-largest population in the nation. Nebraska has the most roundabouts per person, but they're spread across one of the sparsest (and often most scenic) road networks in the country. Per mile of road, Maryland actually emerges as the roundabout champion.

Roundabout rankings

State rankings depend greatly on whether you're looking at a per-mile or per-person bas

Search in table

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STATE	ROUNDABOUTS	RANK PER MILE	R PER
Florida	749	3	
Indiana	504	4	
Washington	501	2	
Wisconsin	495	8	
California	481	17	
North Carolina	467	9	
Colorado	447	6	

Minnesota	430	14
Texas	422	33
Ohio	333	16
Georgia	314	18
Maryland	314	1
Missouri	276	22
Virginia	248	13
Michigan	218	24
Utah	197	10
Kansas	183	32
New York	173	29

Note: Data is current through Nov. 23 and includes true modern roundabouts, not rotaries or traffic-calming circles; rankings include D.C. and Puerto Rico, which are not states.

Source: Lee Rodegerdts of Kittelson & Associates; Census Bureau (people); Bureau of Transportation Statistics (miles) DEPARTMENT OF DATA / THE WASHINGTON

City rankings, on the other hand, are almost pointlessly easy. Almost any way you slice the data, the exclusive Indianapolis suburb of Carmel ranks as the nation's roundabout capital. And, much like Rodegerdts's database, Carmel's network of roundabouts is largely the work of one visionary man — in this case, seven-term Republican mayor and niche-famous roundabout booster Jim Brainard.

A lawyer by training, Brainard's experience with roundabouts when he took office in 1996 consisted of having seen several in the United Kingdom. But those modern intersections made an impression, and when his constituents demanded a safer, more walkable city, he thought he had a solution.

Roundabouts were vanishingly rare in the United States back then. As one of the highest-income, most educated cities in the country, Carmel was fertile ground for the traffic innovation. Still, it took some effort and a weekend research trip to Purdue University to convince the engineer, who was skeptical. (More than a hundred intersections later, Brainard said, that onetime skeptic has become a sought-after leader in roundabout engineering and a commanding general in the roundabout revolution.)

Most roundabout-curious cities and counties have moved cautiously, but Brainard is attaining the traffic-signal-free holy grail of the roundabout revolutionaries through sheer force of will — and a bit of carefully structured public debt.

Brainard's attitude is that if Paris can build a world-class, roundabout-infused urban area on a flat piece of unspectacular but fertile ground, then so can Carmel (pronounced CAR-mull). He's careful but bold, speaking of his goals in epochal terms, referring to European empires and monarchs as he explains the need to build infrastructure to last for the next thousand years.

And monarch is almost a fitting job description for Brainard at this point. Carmel became a city in 1976, as White flight began to swell it and other suburbs. Brainard has now served longer than every other mayor in the city's history combined (a fun fact we borrowed from Indianapolis Star columnist James Briggs). In that time, Brainard saw the city grow from 38,000 residents to more than 100,000.

As mayor, he has built 140-plus roundabouts, slashing traffic fatalities so dramatically that the local fire department rarely uses its Jaws of Life extraction tools anymore. But roundabouts are just one pillar in the grander Brainard plan to build a dense, European-style city in central Indiana. To that end, he's also added winding, leafy trails and a glittering concert hall that hosts everything from Carmel Symphony Orchestra performances to Michael Bolton holiday specials.

The roundabouts are a linchpin in Brainard's vision of a walkable downtown. That's not just because they're often friendlier to pedestrians, but because they can reduce pollution and allow designers to fit more traffic in a smaller space. In a key stretch of its main north-south drag, Carmel replaced five lanes of traffic with just two lanes and multiple roundabouts. Green space and sidewalks have sprouted where those lanes used to be, and total traffic flow on the road has actually increased.

In all of Carmel, just nine regular traffic signals remain, Brainard said. And by the time he leaves office next year, the city will be on track to have just one. Ironically, as a nearby plaque notes, it's the site of one of the first automatic traffic lights in the United States. And now, in Carmel at least, it will be the last.

"It's in the middle of the little downtown that was there forever, and there's buildings on all four corners, so that's the one that'll stay," Brainard said, explaining that there's just no room for a roundabout in that spot.

But "it's safe enough," the mayor assured us. "You can't drive fast through that area."

Why? Because, he said, "We put a roundabout at each end!"

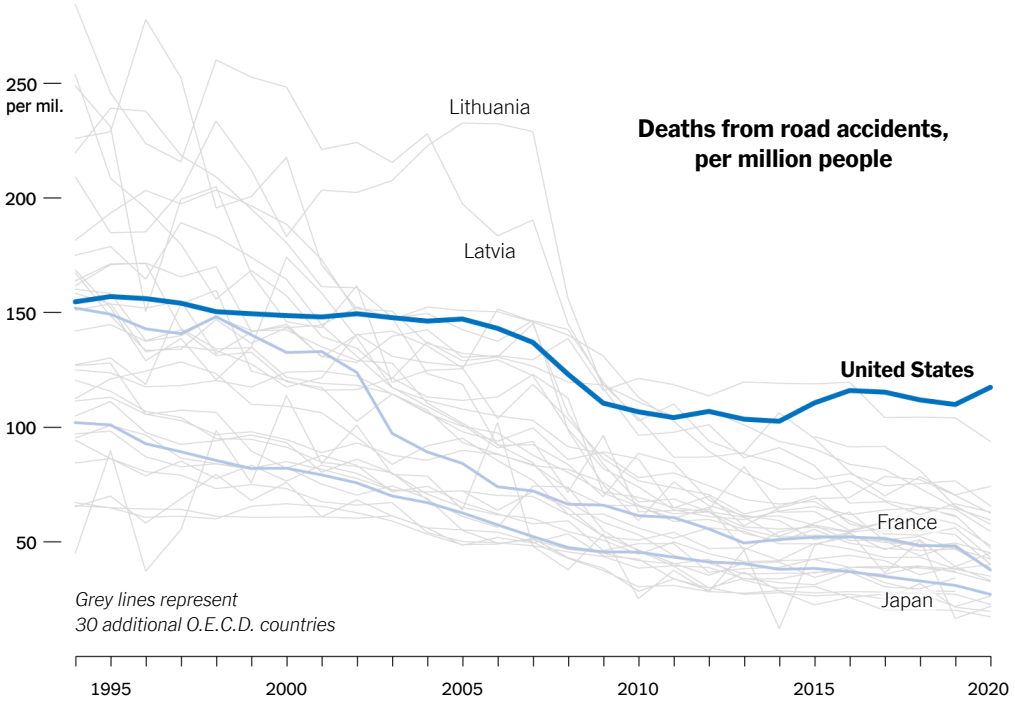
Hello! The Department of Data would be nothing without your data-driven questions! *We want to know what you're curious about. What cities have the worst sprawl? Which countries export the most human hair? How many jobs did the Paycheck Protection Program really save? Just ask!*

To get every question, answer and factoid in your inbox as soon as we publish, sign up here. If your question inspires a column, we'll send an official Department of Data button and ID card. This week, one button goes to our colleague Shira Ovide, who will be your Tech Friend if you sign up for her new newsletter. Shira's questions about revolving doors got us thinking about other much-maligned circular things that are actually way more efficient. Another button goes to Rob DeRocker, the New York public relations professional who represents Carmel and who last year uttered the six most irresistible words in the English language: "Let's do a story about roundabouts."

The New York Times | https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/27/upshot/road-deaths-pedestrians-cyclists.html

The Exceptionally American Problem of Rising Roadway Deaths

Why other rich nations have surpassed the U.S. in protecting pedestrians, cyclists and motorists.



Source: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development • The New York Times

By Emily Badger and Alicia Parlapiano

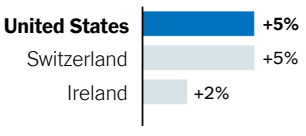
Nov. 27, 2022

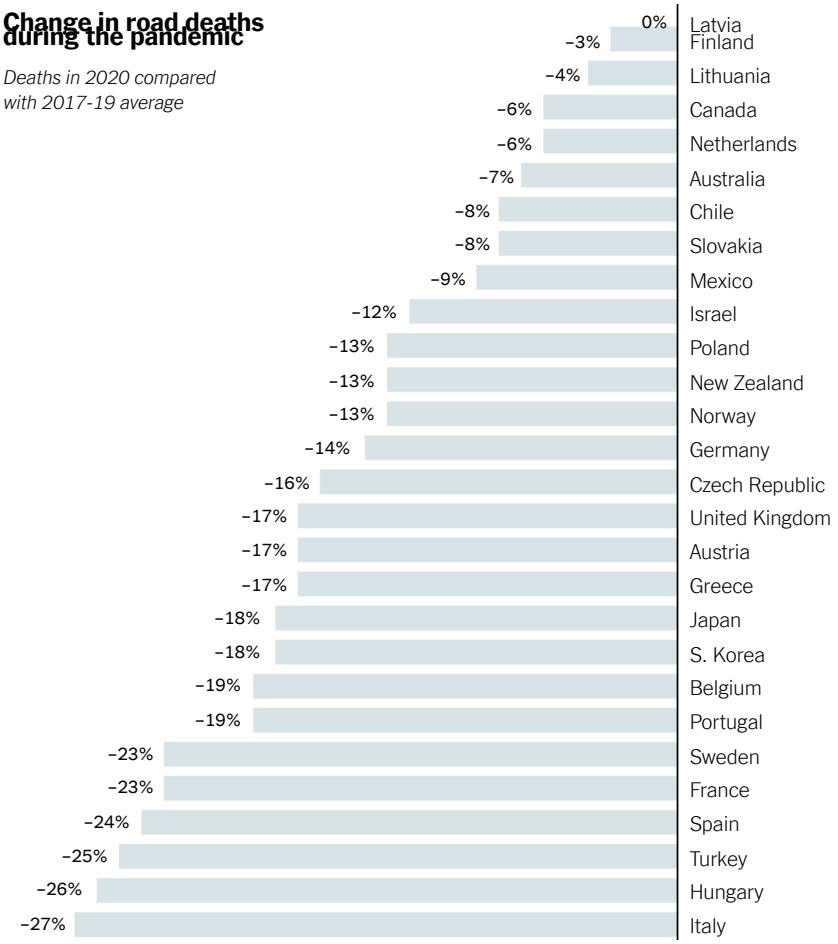
About a thousand people gathered on a bright morning on the National Mall the Saturday before Thanksgiving for what has become an American tradition: mourning a roadway fatality. With the Capitol in the background and the tune of an ice cream truck looping nearby, the crowd had assembled to remember Sarah Debbink Langenkamp, who was biking home from her sons' elementary school when she was crushed by a semi truck.

Ms. Langenkamp was, improbably, the third foreign service officer at the State Department to die while walking or biking in the Washington area this year. She was killed in August in suburban Bethesda, Md. Another died in July while biking in Foggy Bottom. The third, a retired foreign service officer working on contract, was walking near the agency's headquarters in August. That is more foreign service officers killed by vehicles at home than have died overseas this year, noted Dan Langenkamp, Ms. Langenkamp's husband and a foreign service officer himself.

"It's infuriating to me as a U.S. diplomat," he told the rally in her honor, "to be a person that goes around the world bragging about our record, trying to get people to think like us — to know that we are such failures on this issue."

That assessment has become increasingly true. The U.S. has diverged over the past decade from other comparably developed countries, where traffic fatalities have been falling. This American exception became even starker during the pandemic. In 2020, as car travel plummeted around the world, traffic fatalities broadly fell as well. But in the U.S., the opposite happened. Travel declined, and deaths still went up. Preliminary federal data suggests road fatalities rose again in 2021.





Source: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development • The New York Times

Safety advocates and government officials lament that so many deaths are often tolerated in America as an unavoidable cost of mass mobility. But periodically, the illogic of that toll becomes clearer: Americans die in rising numbers even when they drive less. They die in rising numbers even as roads around the world grow safer. American foreign service officers leave war zones, only to die on roads around the nation's capital.

In 2021, nearly 43,000 people died on American roads, the government estimates. And the recent rise in fatalities has been particularly pronounced among those the government classifies as most vulnerable — cyclists, motorcyclists, pedestrians.

Much of the familiar explanation for America's road safety record lies with a transportation system primarily designed to move cars quickly, not to move people safely.

"Motor vehicles are first, highways are first, and everything else is an afterthought," said Jennifer Homendy, chair of the National Transportation Safety Board.

That culture is baked into state transportation departments that have their roots in the era of Interstate highway construction (and through which most federal transportation dollars flow). And it's especially apparent in Sun Belt metros like Tampa and Orlando that boomed after widespread adoption of the car — the roads there are among the most dangerous in the country for cyclists and pedestrians.

The fatality trends over the last 25 years, though, aren't simply explained by America's history of highway development or dependence on cars. In the 1990s, per capita roadway fatalities across developed countries were significantly higher than today. And they were higher in South Korea, New Zealand and Belgium than in the U.S. Then a revolution in car safety brought more seatbelt usage, standard-issue airbags and safer car frames, said Yonah Freemark, a researcher at the Urban Institute.

Fatalities fell as a result, in the U.S. and internationally. But as cars grew safer for the people inside them, the U.S. didn't progress as other countries did to prioritizing the safety of people *outside* them.

"Other countries started to take seriously pedestrian and cyclist injuries in the 2000s — and started making that a priority in both vehicle design and street design — in a way that has never been committed to in the United States," Mr. Freemark said.

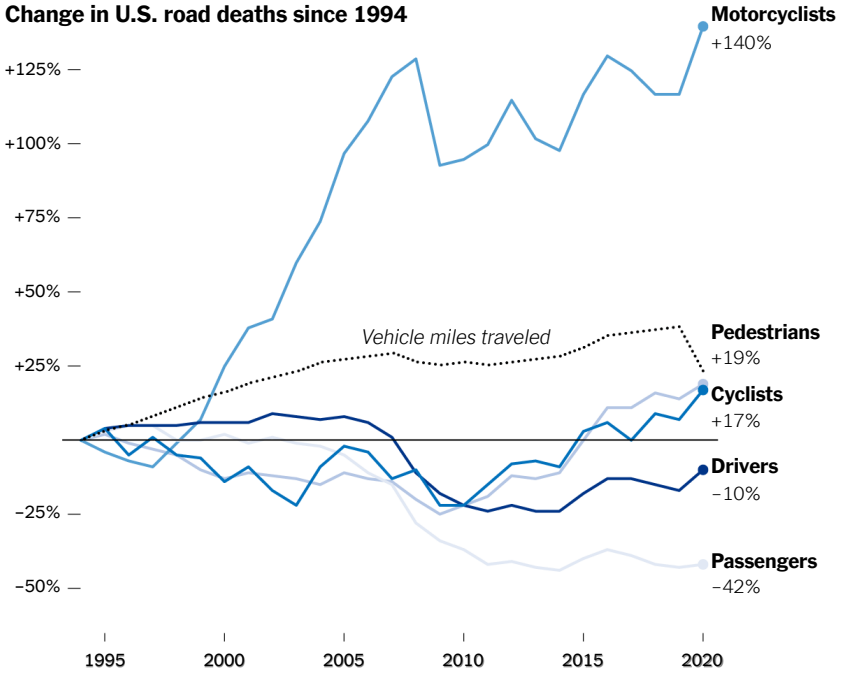
Other developed countries lowered speed limits and built more protected bike lanes. They moved faster in making standard in-vehicle technology like automatic braking systems that detect pedestrians, and vehicle hoods that are less deadly to them. They designed roundabouts that reduce the danger at intersections, where fatalities disproportionately occur.

In the U.S. in the past two decades, by contrast, vehicles have grown significantly bigger and thus deadlier to the people they hit. Many states curb the ability of local governments to set lower speed limits. The five-star federal safety rating that consumers can look for when buying a car today doesn't take into consideration what that car might do to pedestrians.

These diverging histories mean that while the U.S. and France had similar per capita fatality rates in the 1990s, Americans today are three times as likely to die in a traffic crash, according to Mr. Freemark's research.

Over this time, more people have been traveling by motorcycle and bike in the U.S. Bike-share systems spread around the country, and new modes like electric bikes and scooters have followed, heightening the need to adapt roads — and the way users of all kinds share them — for a world not dominated solely by automobiles.

Cycling advocates said they expected there would be safety in numbers as more people biked and as drivers grew accustomed to sharing the road, reducing deaths. Instead, the opposite has happened.



Note: Motorcycle registrations doubled in the U.S. between 2002 and 2020. • Sources: U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; Insurance Institute for Highway Safety • The New York Times

The pandemic similarly skewed expectations. As countries adopted lockdowns and social distancing rules, streets across the world emptied. Polly Trottenberg, then New York City's transportation commissioner, recalled a remarkable lull early in the pandemic when the city had zero pedestrian deaths. She knew it couldn't last.

"I hate to say it, but I felt this anxiety that things were going to roar back in a bad way," said Ms. Trottenberg, now the deputy secretary at the U.S. Department of Transportation.

On empty pandemic roads, it was easy to see exactly what kind of transportation infrastructure the U.S. had built: wide roads, even in city centers, that seemed to invite speeding. By the end of 2020 in New York, traffic fatalities on those roads had surged from prepandemic times.

"We have a system that allows this incredible abuse, if the conditions are ripe for it," Mr. Freemark said.

And that's precisely what the conditions were during the pandemic. There was little congestion holding back reckless drivers. Many cities also curtailed enforcement, closed DMV offices and offered reprieves for drivers who had unpaid tickets, expired drivers' licenses and out-of-state tags.

The pandemic made more apparent how much American infrastructure contributes to dangerous conditions, in ways that can't be easily explained by other factors.

"We are not the only country with alcohol," said Beth Osborne, director of the advocacy group Transportation for America. "We're not the only country with smartphones and distraction. We were not the only country impacted by the worldwide pandemic."

Rather, she said, other countries have designed transportation systems where human emotion and error are less likely to produce deadly results on roadways.

Green dots are part of a street signal design in Berlin aimed to improve traffic safety and induce vehicles to slow as they approach the painted area. Felipe Trueba/EPA, via Shutterstock

What the U.S. can do to change this is obvious, advocates say: like outfitting trucks with side underride guards to prevent people from being pulled underneath, or narrowing the roads that cars share with bikes so that drivers intuit they should drive slower.

"We know what the problem is, we know what the solution is," said Caron Whitaker, deputy executive director at the League of American Bicyclists. "We just don't have the political will to do it."

The bipartisan infrastructure bill passed last year takes modest steps toward changing that. There is more federal money for pedestrian and cycling infrastructure. And states will now be required to analyze fatalities and serious injuries among "vulnerable road users" — people outside of cars — to identify the most dangerous traffic corridors and potential ways to fix them.

States where vulnerable road users make up at least 15 percent of fatalities must spend at least 15 percent of their federal safety funds on improvements prioritizing those vulnerable users. Today, 32 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia face that mandate.

The larger question is whether Americans are willing to stop being exceptional in the world in this way.

"We need to change the culture that accepts this level of death and injury," Ms. Trottenberg said. "We're horrified when State Department employees lose their lives overseas. We need to create that same sense of urgency when it comes to roadway deaths."

Emily Badger writes about cities and urban policy for The Upshot from the Washington bureau. She's particularly interested in housing, transportation and inequality — and how they're all connected. She joined The Times in 2016 from The Washington Post. @emilymbadger

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Why Road Deaths Are Declining Across Globe, but Not in the U.S.

OPINION AND COMMENTARY

Editorials and other Opinion content offer perspectives on issues important to our community and are independent from the work of our newsroom reporters.

OPINION

NC business leaders: The state gas tax is the wrong way to fund roads

BY GARY J. SALAMIDO AND JOE MILAZZO II

NOVEMBER 27, 2022 5:30 AM

Car and commercial truck traffic backs up on I-40 near the Raleigh-Durham International Airport. FILE PHOTO

North Carolina is quickly emerging as a leading destination for the transition to electric vehicles. Thanks to multi-billion dollar investments by companies including Toyota and VinFast, our state will be the home of the newest, cleanest generation of automobile mobility.

The transition to EVs — and to hybrid vehicles and increased fuel efficiency overall — means that the days of the gas tax effectively funding our roadways are numbered. The N.C. Department of Transportation will need new, stable revenue streams to keep our state moving forward.

The importance of North Carolina's transportation network cannot be overstated. Our roads, bridges, ports, railways, and airports provide the pathways that keep commerce moving and connect North Carolina's businesses and its people to the rest of the global economy. A robust, well-funded transportation network means more high-quality jobs for communities across our state.

North Carolina is second only to Texas in the number of state-maintained miles of road. As the Tar Heel State becomes increasingly desirable for its economy and

quality of life, investments in the infrastructure to move people and products safely and efficiently is critical.

Since 2014, NCDOT has charged a fee for EVs, since they cannot pay fuel taxes. The organized regional and statewide business community is elevating a proposal to modernize state highway funding, based on that framework, in the form of a vehicle registration-based access user fee.

The concept is this:

▪ Raise the annual EV fee (currently $140.25) to what the owner of the typical gasoline-powered vehicle pays in gas taxes over the course of a year (currently around $237);

▪ Charge all passenger vehicles the same rate — whether electric, gasoline, or hybrid;

▪ Allow vehicle owners to pay the access fee on a monthly, quarterly, or annual basis; and

▪ Eliminate all state gas taxes.

The fee would not initially apply to diesel vehicles, so current truck taxation methods would remain.

Gary Salamido

With an access fee,

Joe Milazzo II

everyone would pay the same rate, regardless of the type of vehicle you drive, where you live, or month-to-month variation in travel. An access fee would be analogous to a typical monthly mobile phone bill, which does not vary regardless of minutes used.

Drivers who travel further for work and other activities would pay less in access fees than they do today in gas taxes. Transportation fees would be more predictable and stable, for both motorists and NCDOT, even if travel and fuel usage were to drop in a recession or pandemic. Plus, the state won't have to create a new revenue collection bureaucracy, and North Carolinians won't have to track vehicle miles traveled.

An access user fee is just one idea to modernize our state's transportation funding model. Since sales tax is collected on several transportation-related expenses, state leaders recently implemented an allocation of sales tax revenue so that transportation dollars will be dedicated to transportation purposes. Removing the cap on public-private partnerships is another opportunity for consideration.

North Carolina's business community is aligned in working to secure diversified revenue streams to keep our roads, railways, ports and airports well-funded over the next decade and beyond. North Carolina lawmakers and policymakers from both major parties are speaking up about the need to modernize transportation funding. The NC Chamber, Regional Transportation Alliance, and businesses in our Destination 2030 Coalition remain focused on this priority, and NCDOT's NC FIRST Commission and legislative initiatives have joined us in identifying workable ideas.

Solutions are on the table, and our state needs a bipartisan, 21st century transportation funding model that is durable, equitable, and competitive. Let's focus on solutions, and let's keep North Carolina moving.

Gary J. Salamido is the president and CEO of the NC Chamber, the leading business advocacy organization in North Carolina. Joe Milazzo II is the executive director of the Regional Transportation Alliance, the voice of the regional business community on transportation in the Triangle region.

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