Evanston's Streets Have Become Safer for Cyclists. Here's How.

Chicago has seen traffic crashes, injuries and deaths increase in the past decade. As city leaders try to reverse the trend, Evanston has set a powerful example.

ALEX NITKIN | ILLINOIS ANSWERS JANUARY 5, 2024

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There's a wide spectrum of cyclists who take to the streets each week with the Evanston Bicycle Club.

Newer, lower-speed riders mostly stay inside Evanston and surrounding suburbs, taking advantage of barrier-protected bike lanes and quieter residential streets. Cyclists with a bit more energy and experience go for longer rides up to Wilmette or Glencoe.

But only the more advanced groups venture into the city of Chicago, said Al Cubbage, who last month ended a two-year stint as president of the club, which organizes multiple rides per week.

Taking Clark Street down through Rogers Park means "taking your life into your own hands," said Cubbage, a retiree who considers himself an intermediate rider. "We have to give people a reminder that it's a busy street. There's lots of cars, lots of delivery trucks."

In 2022, the latest year complete data is available, 201 people were killed on Chicago's roadways. Traffic crashes, injuries and deaths have risen in the past decade, following national trends aligning with the proliferation of smartphones and ever-larger vehicles.

As city leaders strain to reverse the trend, Evanston has set a powerful example. Following a coordinated, yearslong effort to slow down drivers, Evanston has seen traffic-related injuries in the last decade fall by nearly half and the city went five years without a death, state records show.

That success caught the attention of U.S. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, who praised Evanston last January at the U.S. Conference of Mayors for its role in advancing traffic safety.

Evanston has "seen several years without a single traffic death thanks to robust complete streets programs, anti-speeding efforts and other measures," Buttigieg said.

Advocates and officials say Evanston's success has bolstered the argument they've made for years: forcing drivers to slow down, especially in ways that expand designated spaces for cyclists and pedestrians, make streets safer for all users.

Evanston city officials say they've achieved that goal through a coordinated and centralized effort that incorporates feedback without letting drivers, business owners or even local elected officials undermine their vision for a safer and more accessible public way.

While Chicago faces obstacles to following in Evanston's footsteps, advocates are pointing to signs that the city could be on the cusp of a breakthrough.

How Evanston built its way to safety

Evanston's roadway overhaul dates back to 2009, when the city published a 223-page transportation plan that laid out a strategic foundation for the city's roadways to balance different modes of transportation.

The plan set no specific goals related to traffic safety, said Lara Biggs, the city's lead engineer.

"The intent initially was just to create a way for people to safely bike around town," Biggs said. "But when you put in a bike lane, you almost always have to narrow the traffic lanes, and … people start to naturally slow down."

The Evanston City Council followed up with multiple ordinances to lower speed limits on major streets, combined with a series of planned "road diets" that narrowed roadways and created barriers that forced drivers to slow down.

Since 2015, Evanston's Public Works Agency has overseen the construction of barrier-protected bike lanes on Dodge Avenue near Evanston Township High School and on Sheridan Road near the Northwestern University campus, all while budgeting consistent amounts each year for new sidewalk extensions and speed bumps in the most crash-prone spots.

A decade later, the evidence is clear: Evanston's streets are safer.

Roadway crashes in the suburb steadily fell by 33% in a decade, from more than 1,200 in 2012 to just over 800 in 2022, according to data from the Illinois Department of Transportation. Traffic injuries fell by 44%, with 347 people hurt on Evanston's roadways in 2012 compared to 193 in 2022.

By early 2023, when Buttigieg addressed the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the city had not registered a single traffic death since late 2018 after having averaged about two deaths per year between 2010 and 2016, according to state records. Two pedestrians have since been killed in traffic crashes in Evanston.

For comparison, 46 of Chicago's 50 wards – each of whose population is smaller than Evanston – averaged at least one traffic death per year between 2019 and 2022, and 16 wards averaged at least four deaths per year, according to the city's Vision Zero Data Portal. Cicero, a suburb just west of Chicago whose population is comparable to Evanston, averaged about four deaths and 400 injuries per year during the same period.

The transformation of Evanston's roadways has not come without some backlash. In 2018, neighbors along Dodge Avenue in southwest Evanston pushed back against an effort to use parking spots as a barrier between car traffic and bike lanes. A local alderman called the barrier-protected lanes "chaotic and disruptive" for contributing to car traffic, and she pushed for the project's undoing.

But city leaders opted to keep the lanes in place after Biggs presented data showing a sharp drop in crash-related injuries along Dodge since buffers were put in place, even as side-swipes increased.

"Because the lanes were narrower, traffic slowed down, and visibility was better so there were fewer conflicts between pedestrians and cars that were turning," Biggs said. "The purpose of that project was not to slow traffic, but the whole thing kind of became naturally traffic-calming."

Problems in Chicago: 'An extraordinarily sad narrative'

Chicago's roadways are, in many ways, incomparable to Evanston's. The suburb has no expressways and only a handful of busy arterial streets, while Chicago has dozens.

Chicago's sheer size, with more than 30 times Evanston's population, and its vast constellation of decision-makers and funding sources make it difficult to carry out a proactive and coordinated citywide plan, officials and advocates say.

"Ending traffic fatalities is not rocket science," said Chicago Ald. Daniel La Spata (1st), who chairs the City Council Committee on Pedestrian and Traffic Safety. "It's a combination of smart infrastructure, education and reasonable enforcement. We know how to do that. We just need to choose to do it."

City officials have installed multiple safety upgrades in La Spata's ward in recent years — but often in response to high-profile tragedies, he said.

"It speaks to a particular challenge in Chicago that our infrastructure improvements tend to be reactionary to traffic fatalities," La Spata said. "That is an extraordinarily sad narrative for a city to have."

Improvements have not been equally distributed across the city — in large part, La Spata said, because alderpeople have wide latitude to guide policies in their own wards. Council members are allocated $1.5 million each year in discretionary "menu" funds under their control, and the unwritten rule of "aldermanic prerogative" means they have heavy influence over other infrastructure spending in their wards.

Some alderpeople have resisted new bike lanes or even pushed to have them removed, citing backlash from drivers. During a budget hearing in October, South Side Ald. David Moore (17th) said he would only support new bike lanes in his ward "if I see a need for it…but in so many cases, they're causing more problems than not."

In a subsequent interview with Illinois Answers, Moore said new painted bike lanes along Vincennes Avenue in Auburn Gresham caused so much traffic near Westcott Elementary School that he had to call on police to monitor the area at pickup and dropoff times.

"Traffic gets so backed up, cars are swerving around and driving in the bike lanes, sometimes almost hitting kids," Moore said. "I'm also having residents call and complain because we're getting cars and trucks driving up and down the side streets."

Aldermanic prerogative can be a barrier to citywide planning, said Jim Merrell, advocacy director for the Active Transportation Alliance, which lobbies for policies that support walking, cycling and public transit.

"Alders are incredibly important stakeholders and conveners, but we need to let transportation decisions be made by professionals," Merrell said. "In many ways, we still have 50 different fiefdoms, and it's hard to build a citywide network when you have that many veto points."

Another barrier is channeling the gamut of funding sources and programs across city agencies and neighborhoods — and across mayoral administrations — into a unified, cohesive planning process like Evanston's, he said.

Unlike most of its peers, Chicago does not pass an annual budget for capital projects, making it difficult to track yearly progress.

As for longer-range strategies, Mayor Rahm Emanuel's administration released a "Vision Zero action plan" in 2017 and followed up a year later with a plan to prioritize "high-crash corridors" for safety revamps. The action plan sought to reduce deaths from traffic crashes by 20% by 2020. Instead, traffic deaths increased by 28% from 2017 to 2020.

The Department of Transportation under Mayor Lori Lightfoot did not update either plan, instead releasing a broader "strategic plan for transportation" that charted out new goals and criteria for success.

"Every different mayor who comes in wants to put their own unique mark on things, so you don't necessarily have sustained political champions with the same priorities," Merrell said.

Lessons from Evanston's planning

The Evanston Public Works Agency takes feedback and ideas from City Council members and their constituents, but the city's nine alderpeople aren't empowered to make decisions about new infrastructure on their own. Instead, city transportation officials synthesize public input with crash data to decide which projects should be prioritized, said Biggs, the suburb's lead traffic engineer.

Evanston city leaders chart out their longer-range spending goals in five-year capital plans, combined with annual capital budgets to nail down the specifics of how each project's timing and spending fits into the bigger picture, Biggs said.

"The City Council always has the right to make changes, and we always try to make sure they understand what's in the annual capital plan," she said. "But the City Council is generally really supportive of the staff recommendations, partly because we're choosing projects based on where we know the most problems are."

The annual budgets also help Biggs and her team ensure the city spends consistent amounts on improvements each year. The city allots $300,000 annually to build or replace sidewalks, plus another $250,000 for "traffic calming" infrastructure like new speed humps, crosswalks and speed radar signs, Biggs said.

Evanston took another step to centralize its planning process in 2021 when it retired its Shared Cost Sidewalk Replacement Program that let residents apply for sidewalk restoration projects. By switching to a grid system, Evanston prioritized the most dangerous sidewalks instead of those forefronted by the city's most politically engaged, Biggs said.

Cities that take proactive approaches to upgrading infrastructure are usually better at protecting their most vulnerable residents than cities with reactive, complaint-based models, said Victoria Barrett, a senior urban planner with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

"We've seen a lot of inequitable deployment of safety infrastructure," Barrett said. "The people who are most affected by traffic safety are usually the people who are most disenfranchised from the political process."

Reasons for hope in Chicago: 'We have a blueprint'

Despite the barriers holding back Chicago from replicating Evanston's success, advocates say they're emboldened by an unprecedented gush of infrastructure funds.

The five-year "Chicago Works" capital improvement plan, bolstered by a 2021 bond, tees up billions of dollars for streetscape improvements. The state's 2019 Rebuild Illinois capital plan, the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in 2021 and Cook County's annual Invest in Cook capital program combine for billions in additional funding that was unavailable to Chicago just five years ago.

"This has been the biggest story in transportation that no one's talking about," Merrell said. "Having local dollars for street improvements that don't come will all the strings of state and federal dollars — and also doesn't come from the aldermanic menu budgets that require negotiation and haggling — means we're able to build more things, more quickly."

Between 2021 and 2022, arterial resurfacing projects alone brought about 802 new curb extensions, 55 sidewalk bump-outs, 52 new pedestrian refuge islands, 17 miles of new bike lanes and 22 miles of repainted bike lanes, the city reported in December 2022.

The transportation department installed just 14 miles of new barrier-protected bike lanes across the city between 2018 and 2022. But as of last month, the city was on pace to add 55 miles of "bikeway projects" in 2023 alone, said Erica Schroeder, spokesperson for the Chicago Department of Transportation.
Last year, officials identified locations and secured funding for another 150 miles of new bike lanes, with more than 120 of those miles protected by barriers, the department said in its spring 2023 Chicago Cycling Update.

"While any traffic fatality is too many, we are continuing to see positive trends in traffic safety following a spike in traffic fatalities during the COVID-19 pandemic," Schroeder wrote in an emailed statement.

State records show about a 3% dip in Chicago roadway injuries and a 13% drop in deaths between 2021 and 2022. And while state data is not yet available for 2023, Schroeder pointed to the city's Vision Zero Data Portal, which shows a 22% drop in traffic deaths across the city during the first 10 months of 2023 compared to a year earlier.

Schroeder attributed the declines to "making sustained investments in infrastructure improvements, strengthening community partnerships to identify and program local safety initiatives, and enforcing rules of the road."

While not yet enough to prove a sustained trend, officials have pointed to local successes they say are further proof of positive effects.

A "road diet" project on Jackson Boulevard through Columbus Park contributed to a 75% drop in speeding violations, according to the strategic plan one-year update. And officials have measured sharp drops in driving speeds along stretches of Augusta Boulevard and Kedzie Avenue where buffered bike lanes were installed earlier this year.

La Spata said he and his constituents have reaped the benefits of new roadway infrastructure in his Near Northwest Side ward, which included the installation of protected bike lanes along Milwaukee Avenue and speed cameras and curb extensions at the crash-heavy intersection of Fullerton and

Washtenaw avenues. The 1st ward recorded just one death in 2023, compared to three in 2022 and five in 2021, according to the Vision Zero Data Portal.

“We know how to do it. We have a blueprint. And we have the funding,” La Spata said. “All we need is the political will to want to do it.”

This article first appeared on Illinois Answers Project.

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