

LOCAL

## Durham, Orange chart new transportation path away from more and bigger highways

BY RICHARD STRADLING

UPDATED FEBRUARY 24, 2022 10:11 AM



In this file photo from 2016, westbound traffic on Interstate 40 is backed up just east of the N.C. 86 interchange. The N.C. Department of Transportation plans to widen this section of I-40 to six lanes. HARRY LYNCH@NEWSOBSERVER.COM



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### DURHAM

The organization that does transportation planning for Durham and much of Orange County wants the state to spend less on building new freeways and widening existing ones.

[The Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization or MPO](#) recently approved a 30-year plan that eliminates some long-anticipated projects, such as widening the Durham Freeway near Research Triangle Park and converting sections of U.S. 70 and U.S. 15-501 into expressways.

In their place, the plan calls for spending more on transit, including increased bus service and new bus rapid transit lines. It also places more emphasis on bike lanes, crosswalks and sidewalks used by cyclists and pedestrians.

The plan is meant to support goals pushed by the public and adopted by the MPO's board that include eliminating fatal crashes, reducing carbon emissions to zero and ensuring that everyone has access to affordable transportation.

First drafts of the plan included traditional highway expansion projects that seemed to undermine those goals, said Jenn Weaver, the mayor of Hillsborough who heads the MPO board. So the board asked the staff to try again.

"It's a long-range plan, and we saw that in the out years we were going to have more congestion and more emissions and that this was not in alignment with our goals and values as an MPO or as a region," Weaver said.

## NEW APPROACH TO TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

The plan, approved earlier this month, is “transformational” because it reflects a new approach to transportation by an MPO, said Kym Hunter, an attorney for the [Southern Environmental Law Center in Chapel Hill](#). Hunter said her organization hopes to use the Durham-Orange plan as a model for other MPOs, which do transportation planning in urban areas throughout the state.

“I think previously there’s been a very constrained thinking about long-range planning that is tied into what’s possible today, and it’s just a very business-as-usual approach,” she said. “And what they did here was say, ‘Wait, we have all these goals for climate and equity and safety and this plan is not helping us to get there.’”

The revised plan sets up potential conflicts with the N.C. Department of Transportation, which owns the highways the MPO says it no longer wants expanded.

NCDOT had someone in the room throughout the development of the plan, so it understands the MPO’s thinking, said Brandon Jones, the department’s regional engineer. Jones said there’s always some give-and-take between an MPO and NCDOT when it comes to deciding what to do along a particular road or on a specific project.

“We’re kind of bound by each other’s plans; they need to match in the short term,” Jones said. “So that kind of brings us to the table to work out differences to make sure that improvements move forward.”

Lisa Mathis, [a state Board of Transportation member](#) who sits on the Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro board, called the MPO forward thinking and courageous for crafting a different vision of transportation that “might cause a stir.”

But she said the plan represents an ideal that will be modified, as long-range plans usually are, when individual roads and projects are evaluated.

“So will this plan be unchanged? No,” she said. “There will be things that are shifted in it. But we’re going to try to help them see as much of their vision as we can.”

## NO MAJOR HIGHWAY PROJECTS AFTER 2040

MPOs were created by Congress and are required to publish a new 30-year plan every five years for projects to receive federal transportation funding. The [DCHC’s 2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan was published](#) together with a plan for Wake County and other eastern Triangle communities crafted by the [Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization or CAMPO](#).

The two plans have similar goals but with key differences. For example, where CAMPO wants to “increase the safety of travelers and residents,” DCHC aims for “zero deaths and serious injuries on our transportation system.”

And where CAMPO includes new “major roadway projects” through 2050, DCHC has no new ones starting after 2040.

Not all highway projects in Durham and Orange counties would be eliminated under the DCHC plan. Most notably, [the widening of Interstates 40 and 85 in Orange County from four to six lanes](#) will proceed as previously planned.

But several widening or expressway projects conceived years ago and included in previous versions of the long-range plan have been nixed.

“Every few years, when we had been updating our plans, we had been moving those projects along,” said Andy Henry, the DCHC planner who put together the plan. “This time, they didn’t make the cut.”

## PREVIOUS DECISIONS BASED ON TRAFFIC MODELS

That decision runs counter to the way transportation planning is typically done in North Carolina. NCDOT and MPOs usually look at computer traffic models that predict future demand for highways, then decide how to increase capacity to try to meet that demand, Jones said.

Critics of that approach say building new roads or adding lanes only attracts more drivers that soon clog things up again. This “induced” demand means NCDOT can’t build enough to relieve congestion in growing places such as the Triangle.

John Tallmadge, executive director of the [advocacy group Bike Durham](#), said transit and bicycle and pedestrian projects have been afterthoughts even as the impact of ever more highway spending has gone unquestioned.

“We have not been addressing that fundamental assumption that leads to more vehicle miles traveled which leads to more pollution and that leads to higher speeds which leads to more deaths and serious injuries,” Tallmadge said. “And it leads to a system that works if you have a car and traps people in poverty if they don’t have a car.”

Instead of expanding highways, the DCHC plan now calls for “modernizing,” a vague term that can mean something different on each road, Henry said. In some cases, it may mean building a median or new turn lanes or adding bike lanes or sidewalks. On a freeway, it may mean fortifying the shoulder for use by buses.

## FROM U.S. FREEWAY TO WHAT?

One stretch of road now pegged for modernization is U.S. 70 from Lynn Road east to the Wake County line.

Previous long-range plans have called for [converting that four-lane highway into a six-lane freeway](#), with an interchange at South Miami Boulevard and Sherron Road. NCDOT had planned the conversion as part of a broader plan to [make U.S. 70 a freeway from I-540 in Raleigh to I-85 in Durham](#).

Now NCDOT and the MPO will have to work out what modernizing the road would entail, if not a freeway. And NCDOT will need to determine how that Durham section fits with the freeways on either end, including [a one-mile section at Brier Creek in Raleigh slated to be built later this decade](#).

The previous plans for U.S. 70 affected people beyond Durham by creating a parallel expressway alternative to I-40. NCDOT will need to determine how to meet the region’s transportation needs while adhering as much as possible to the DCHC’s vision, said Jones, the regional engineer.

“The key is making sure that we’re correctly identifying all the needs for the corridor,” he said. “And then seeing how we can meet all of those.”

The DCHC plan also eliminated the idea of widening the Durham Freeway from four to eight lanes between the merge with the East End Connector and I-40 near RTP. That four-lane section of highway is a major commuter route and will likely get busier when the East End Connector opens this spring.

Addressing that congestion will take more creativity than simply adding lanes, said Mathis, the state Board of Transportation member.

“So maybe instead of widening four lanes, we widen and add an HOV lane,” she said. “I mean, there’s a myriad of solutions to this.”

Forgoing large freeway projects should free up money for other types of transportation projects; widening that 4.5-mile stretch of the Durham Freeway was estimated to cost \$251 million.

But a combination of state laws and longstanding policies limit how and how much money can be spent on transit and bicycle and pedestrian projects. The DCHC plan assumes changes in those laws and policies to give urban areas more flexibility in spending transportation money in the future.

Even with all the caveats and work ahead, supporters of the DCHC plan say it expresses the public’s desire for a transportation system that is safe, equitable and environmentally sustainable.

“Even if they don’t get all the way there,” Tallmadge said, “it becomes a document that can be used in public discussion, both with residents and with NCDOT and legislators, about what it’s going to take — the changes in funding, the types of projects that we’re going to be able to do and not going to be able to do — in order to reach those goals.”

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## *How Billions in Infrastructure Funding Could Worsen Global Warming*

Highway expansions tend to bring more greenhouse gas emissions. A few states are trying to change that dynamic, but it won't be easy.



By Brad Plumer

Feb. 10, 2022, 5:00 a.m. ET

The highways in Colorado, one of the nation's fastest-growing states, are frequently clogged with suburban workers driving into Denver, skiers heading high into the Rocky Mountains and trucks rumbling across the Interstates.

A Western frontier state with an affinity for the open road and Subaru Outbacks, Colorado's traditional answer to traffic congestion could be summed up in two words: more asphalt.

But widening highways and paving new roads often just spurs people to drive more, research shows. And as concerns grow about how tailpipe emissions are heating the planet, Colorado is among a handful of car-dominated states that are rethinking road building.

In December, Colorado adopted a first-of-its-kind climate change regulation that will push transportation planners to redirect funding away from highway expansions and toward projects that cut vehicle pollution, such as buses and bike lanes.

It's a big change for Colorado, which is reeling from devastating wildfires and droughts fueled by global warming and where Denver and the Front Range often exceed federal ozone pollution standards, partly from vehicle exhaust. Under Gov. Jared Polis, a Democrat, the state aims to cut transportation emissions 40 percent below 2005 levels by 2030.

The rule marks a new front in the battle against climate change. Increasingly, experts warn that if states want to slash planet-warming emissions from cars and trucks, it won't be enough to sell more electric vehicles. They'll also have to encourage people to drive less.

In a nation built around the automobile, that's not easy.

"It's a tough shift for us," said Shoshana Lew, executive director of Colorado's Department of Transportation. "Colorado is very different from a place like New York City that already has lots of transit. But if we want to clean up our transportation system as quickly as possible, we need to try everything we can."

## **More Roads, More Emissions**

Road work in Denver in July, part of a project to expand Interstate 70. Hyoungh Chang/MediaNews Group/The Denver Post, via Getty Images

Over the coming decade, the decisions that Colorado and other states make about how many new roads to build could have major consequences for America's ability to tackle climate change. Transportation is the nation's largest source of greenhouse gases, producing 29 percent of emissions, and has been stubbornly difficult to clean up.

The new \$1 trillion infrastructure law invests billions in climate-friendly programs like electric car chargers and public transit. But it also gives states \$273 billion for highways over five years, with few strings attached. One analysis from the Georgetown Climate Center found that this money could significantly increase emissions if states keep adding highway lanes.

Already, there are signs that even states with ambitious climate goals like Washington, Illinois and Nevada hope to use federal funds to expand roadways, such as adding lanes to a congested section of the Eisenhower Freeway near Chicago. In 2019, states spent one-third of their highway dollars on new road capacity, roughly \$19.3 billion, with the rest spent on repairs.

“This is a major blind spot for politicians who say they care about climate change,” said Kevin DeGood, director of infrastructure policy at the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank. “Everyone gets that oil pipelines are carbon infrastructure. But new highways are carbon infrastructure, too. Both lock in place 40 to 50 years of emissions.”

The core problem, environmentalists say, is a phenomenon known as “induced traffic demand.” When states build new roads or add lanes to congested highways, instead of reducing traffic, more cars show up to fill the available space.

Induced demand explains why, when Texas widened the Katy Freeway in Houston to more than 20 lanes in 2011, at a cost of \$2.8 billion, congestion returned to previous levels within a few years.

“It’s not always intuitive to people, but the economic logic is pretty simple: If you make driving easier, people will do more of it,” said Susan Handy, a transportation expert at the University of California, Davis, who helped develop a calculator showing how highway expansions can increase emissions in different cities.

## **‘A Monumental Undertaking’**

Denver has added several light-rail lines and express bus routes in recent years. Hyoung Chang/MediaNews Group/The Denver Post, via Getty Images

Some Colorado communities are wary of any shift away from traditional road building. North of Denver sits Weld County, a largely rural region dotted with cattle ranches and oil wells where home building has exploded in recent years, along with traffic. Local officials want new roads, including a \$300 million proposal to add two lanes to a busy stretch of Interstate 25 linking Weld County's swelling exurbs with Denver.

"We need more road capacity," said Scott James, a Weld County commissioner. "And my fear is this rule will either hobble funding for new roads or force us to spend millions on a bunch of buses or transit that just won't work for us in rural Colorado. People move here from Denver or Boulder because they're looking for a certain type of lifestyle. Are we going to punish them for that?"

Under the new rule, part of a \$5.4 billion transportation package passed by the state legislature, local governments will have to estimate the greenhouse gas emissions expected from future road projects, factoring in induced traffic. Those plans will have to adhere to an overall emissions budget: If localities want to expand highways, they need to offset the extra emissions with cleaner projects, such as public transit, bicycle trails, electric-vehicle chargers, car-pooling or land-use changes that help limit suburban sprawl.

Enforcement is strict: If local governments exceed their emissions budgets, the state can withhold funding for roads. Colorado officials estimate the rule could shift \$6.7 billion away from highways by 2050 and reduce driving miles by 7 to 12 percent, compared with business as usual.

Environmental groups hope the rule will force drastic revisions to long-planned highway expansions, like a proposal to widen a congested section of Interstate 25 near low-income neighborhoods in downtown Denver.

“There’s a real opportunity to step back and rethink what we’re doing,” said Danny Katz, executive director of the environmental advocacy group CoPIRG. “If we need to make safety improvements to existing highways, we absolutely should. But let’s resist the temptation to keep widening roads and lock in a car-only approach.”

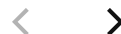
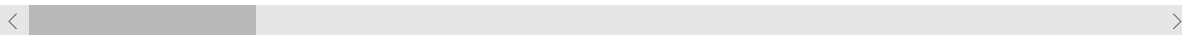
But business groups say Colorado has underinvested in highways for years, while adding 800,000 residents since 2010, and roads designed for an earlier era need to grow.

“We do think it’s likely that emissions will come down naturally as vehicle technology gets cleaner,” said Mike Kopp, president of Colorado Concern, a business coalition. “But in the meantime, people are stuck in traffic, it’s a truly immiserating experience, and we need to alleviate that.”

State officials are trying to thread the needle. Ms. Lew, who heads the Transportation Department, said in the short term she expected several key highway expansion projects to go forward albeit with modifications. For instance, a \$700 million plan to ease a bottleneck on Interstate 70 near Floyd Hill, where mountain-bound skiers jam the roads on weekends, will include a new “micro-transit” shuttle service offering an alternative to cars.

### The Infrastructure Bill at a Glance

**The bill receives final approval.** The House passed the \$1 trillion bill on Nov. 5 to rebuild the country’s aging public works system. The proposal is a central plank of President Biden’s economic agenda, which he signed into law on Nov. 15. Here’s what’s inside the bill:



“There’s not a world where refusing to build another lane there would stop people from trying to go skiing,” Ms. Lew said. “But if we can put in a system of small buses that give people more choices, we can mitigate the impacts.”

The state faces major challenges: While Denver’s transit agency has added several new light-rail lines and express bus routes in recent years, ridership was declining even before the coronavirus pandemic scared people off buses and trains. And the regional organizations that propose transportation projects have limited control over local zoning rules that determine how densely cities develop, and whether homes are built near jobs and transit stops. Those decisions can profoundly influence driving habits.

“We’ve been building communities oriented around cars and single-family homes pretty much since World War II,” said Andrew Gunning, executive director of the Pikes Peak Area Council of Governments, which oversees the rapidly growing region around Colorado Springs. “Trying to retrofit and change how we build those communities is going to be a monumental undertaking.”

Traffic heading toward ski resorts west of Denver in 2018. Thomas Peipert/Associated Press

## **A Growing Fight**

While few states have copied Colorado’s approach, the pushback against highway expansions is slowly growing.

In Oregon, youth activists are protesting a \$1.2 billion plan to widen I-5 through Portland, warning that the expansion will undercut the state’s climate goals. In Wisconsin, officials agreed to review a proposal to add two lanes to I-94 bordering a mostly Black neighborhood in Milwaukee after criticism from civil rights and environmental groups.

In Virginia, transportation planners had long agonized over traffic jams on I-95 between Fredericksburg and Washington. But after extensive study, they found that adding two extra lanes would cost \$12.5 billion and do little to solve congestion. So, last year, Ralph Northam, a Democrat who was governor at the time, announced a \$3.7 billion deal to expand commuter rail service instead.

California has begun revamping its highway policies in an effort to curb car travel. Despite leading the nation in electric vehicle sales, the state is struggling to cut emissions because Californians keep driving more miles.

The state will now measure induced traffic during environmental reviews of new highways and plans to prioritize funding toward fixing existing roads rather than building new ones. Last year, officials halted a plan to widen the 710 freeway, which carries truck traffic from the port of Long Beach, over concerns that it would displace residents in low-income neighborhoods and worsen air pollution.

“The rhetoric we sometimes hear is that we’re trying to take away people’s cars or restrict their mobility,” said Darwin Moosavi, deputy secretary for environmental policy at the California State Transportation Agency. “But what we’re really talking about is giving people better and more convenient options so that they don’t necessarily have to drive everywhere.”

The Biden administration is also weighing in. In December, the Federal Highway Administration issued a memo urging states “to repair and maintain existing transportation infrastructure before making new investments in highway expansions.”

Yet the administration has limited authority to enforce this guidance, and state transportation officials have pushed back against restrictions on highway spending.

“Each individual state has unique challenges they need to address, and there’s not going to be a one-size-fits-all solution,” said Jim Tymon, executive director of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

An early version of the infrastructure bill written by House Democrats would have curtailed states’ ability to fund highway expansions. But those provisions were removed in the Senate.

The law does include \$90 billion for public transportation and \$66 billion for rail. It also gives the federal Department of Transportation \$114 billion in discretionary grants that could influence state plans. But ultimately, states have the final say.

“There’s lots of money for transit, but if new transit lines are surrounded by hundreds of newly expanded highways, how do we think that will work out for the climate?” said Beth Osborne, director of Transportation for America, a transit advocacy group. “The status quo is going to win unless everything aligns to change it.”

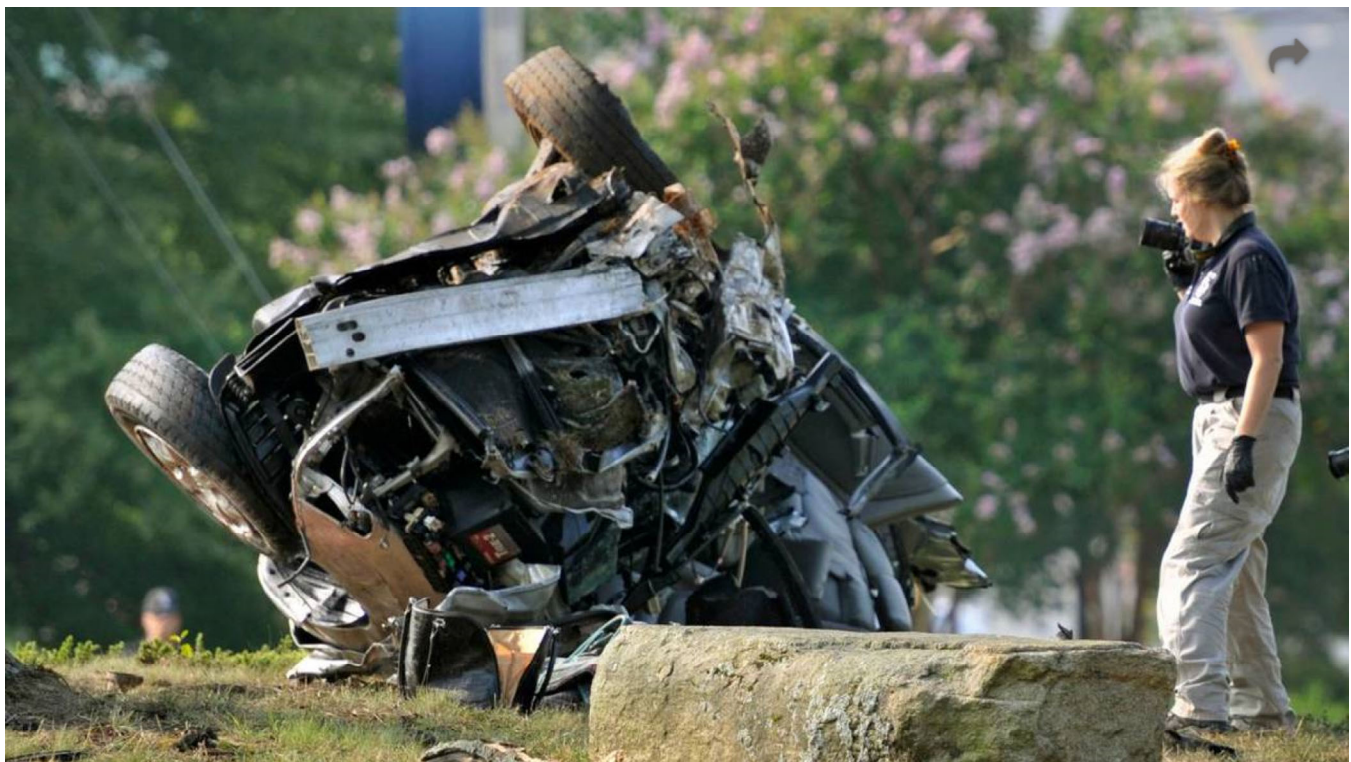


POLITICS &amp; GOVERNMENT

# NCDOT: More people died on NC roads in 2021 than in any year since the early 1970s

BY RICHARD STRADLING

UPDATED FEBRUARY 15, 2022 2:58 PM



Highway deaths in North Carolina have risen 45% since 2011, to 1,755 last year. That's the most in a single year since 1973, when the death toll reached 1,892, according to data compiled by the N.C. Department of Transportation. BY KEVIN KEISTER



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*RALEIGH*

The number of people killed in traffic crashes in North Carolina rose again last year, reaching the highest level since the early 1970s, [according to the N.C. Governor's Highway Safety Program](#).

Highway deaths have risen 45% since 2011, to 1,755 last year. That's the most in a single year since 1973, when the death toll reached 1,892, [according to data compiled by the N.C. Department of Transportation](#).

The preliminary numbers for 2021 are further evidence that decades of gains in highway safety are being eroded. Several factors have helped make driving safer over the years, including increased use of seat belts and improvements to cars and trucks, such as airbags, anti-lock brakes and better protection of occupants in a crash.

The number of highway traffic deaths per capita in North Carolina declined 70% between 1968 and 2011, according to NCDOT.

Since then, deaths per capita have risen by 33%, with the largest jumps coming since the coronavirus pandemic began in early 2020.

## NC HIGHWAY DEATHS PER CAPITA

The number of people killed in vehicle crashes per 100,000 residents has declined since the late 1960s, but it has ticked up in recent years to the highest point in more than a decade.

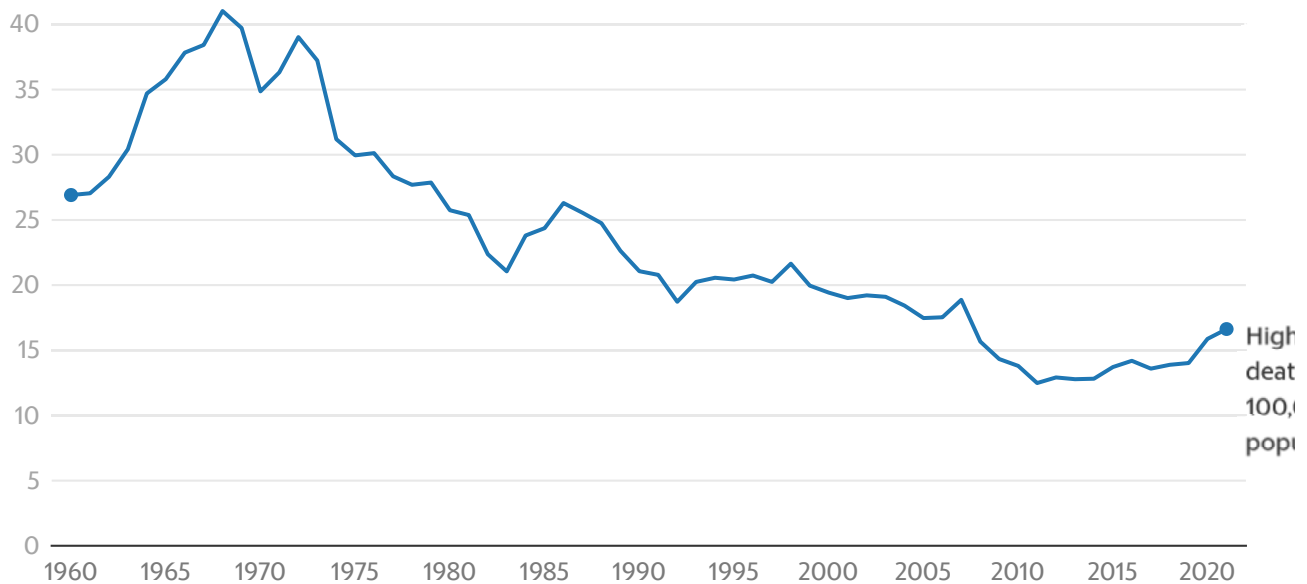


Chart: Richard Stradling • Source: [NC DMV](#), except 2021 from the Governor's Highway Safety Program • [Get the data](#)

“We have seen traffic fatalities moving in the wrong direction for a couple years in North Carolina and across the country,” Mark Ezzell, director of the Highway Safety Program, said in a statement. “It’s going to take an all-hands-on-deck approach from communities, organizations and individual drivers to reverse this trend.”

Ezzell said the 2021 data is based on law enforcement crash reports submitted to NCDOT by the end of the year. He said the numbers are likely to rise as more reports are received and processed.

## NC HIGHWAY DEATHS

In 2021, 1,755 people died in vehicle crashes in North Carolina, the highest number since 2007. That's up from a low of 1,208 in 2011. The highest number of deaths since 1960 was 1,983 in 1972.

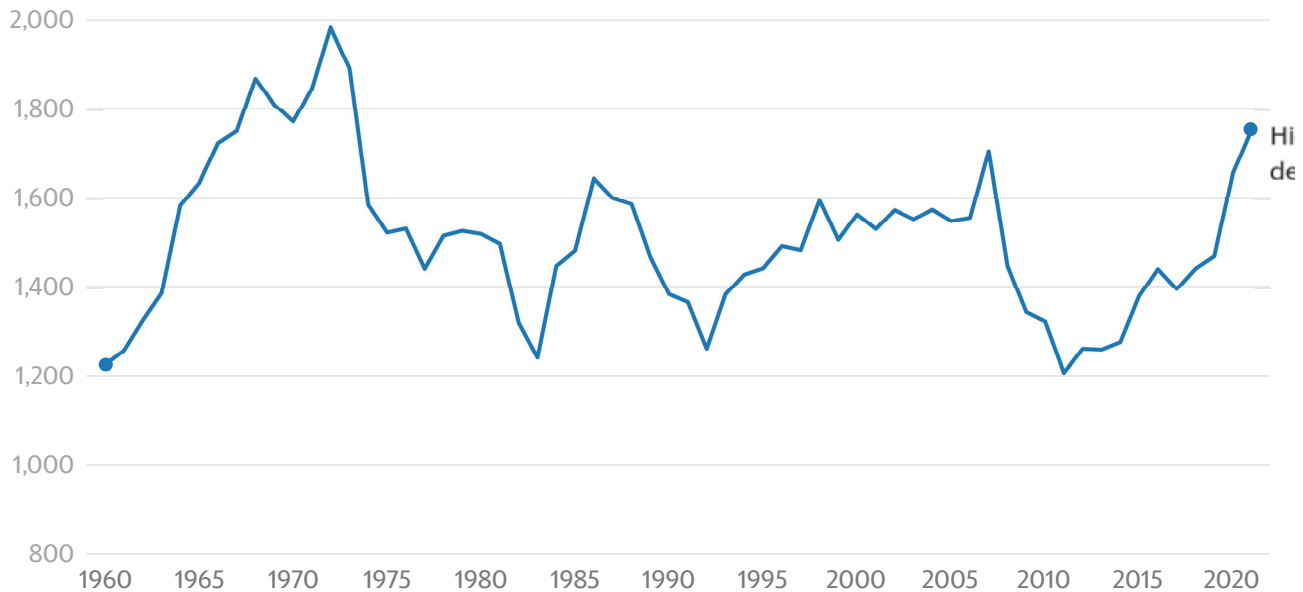


Chart: Richard Stradling • Source: [NC DMV](#), except 2021 data from the Governor's Highway Safety Program. • [Get the data](#)

The rise in traffic fatalities during the COVID-19 pandemic was striking because [overall collisions declined as people drove less](#) when businesses and schools closed.

Traffic safety experts have struggled to explain the conflicting trends but theorize that fewer cars on the road made it easier to speed, increasing the chances that crashes will become fatal. Speeding was a factor in about a quarter of all highway deaths last year, according to the Governor's Highway Safety Program.

Another big factor was lack of seat belt use. The number of unbelted people who died in crashes last year rose slightly, to 546. Subtracting pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists, that means about 43% of people killed in crashes who had access to a seat belt weren't wearing one.

Deaths among motorcyclists last year rose about 15% to 205, according to the Highway Safety Program, while deaths among bicyclists declined about 20% to 23.

Pedestrians accounted for 256 of the people killed in vehicle crashes last year, or about 15% of the total.

The rise in fatalities in North Carolina reflects a nationwide trend. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration this month [estimated that 31,720 people died in motor vehicle crashes](#) in the first nine months of last year, up 12% from the same period a year earlier and the most since 2006.

The estimate came days after the U.S. Department of Transportation [announced a national roadway safety strategy](#) that includes assistance in designing safer roads and requiring new safety technology on cars and trucks.

“This is a national crisis,” Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said in a statement. “We cannot and must not accept these deaths as an inevitable part of everyday life.”



NC Vision Zero went to the streets in cities across North Carolina to talk to people about the ambitious goal of zero roadway deaths. BY NC VISION ZERO

This story was originally published February 15, 2022 10:13 AM.

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## ***Pedestrian Deaths Spike in U.S. as Reckless Driving Surges***

Fatalities are climbing to record levels two years into the pandemic. Authorities cite drivers' anxiety levels, larger vehicles and fraying social norms.

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**By Simon Romero**

Feb. 14, 2022, 5:00 a.m. ET

ALBUQUERQUE — After a festive evening spent viewing a display of holiday lights, Aditya Bhattacharya and his family were crossing a street to head home.

Then a driver blew past a red light, slamming into him and his 7-year-old son, Pronoy.

“I took one step, that’s the last thing I remember,” said Mr. Bhattacharya, 45. “When I regained consciousness, all I could hear was my wife sitting on the sidewalk, screaming, ‘Pronoy’s dead.’”

The boy’s death at an Albuquerque crosswalk in December, and the seven-week manhunt to find the driver, jolted many people in this part of the West to the grim count of pedestrian deaths, which began surging in New Mexico and other states in 2020.

Two years into the pandemic, such fatalities are soaring into record territory amid a nationwide flare-up in reckless driving. In various initiatives to reverse the trends, authorities in one state after another are citing factors from the rise in anxiety levels and pandemic drinking to the fraying of social norms.

Last year, New Mexico recorded 99 pedestrian deaths, up from 81 in 2020 and 83 in 2019 and the most since it began tracking such incidents in the 1990s. But while Sun Belt states have been hit particularly hard, the pedestrian death toll spiked last year in many parts of the country.



Pronoy's mother, Deepshikha Nag Chowdhury, and one of her younger sons at their home in Albuquerque. Adria Malcolm for The New York Times

New Jersey had its highest number of pedestrian fatalities in more than 30 years. Last year was also the deadliest on Utah's roads since the start of the century, as pedestrian deaths rose 22 percent. Washington State ended 2021 with a 15-year high in traffic fatalities. And pedestrian deaths in Texas climbed last year to a record high.

Going into the pandemic, some traffic specialists were optimistic that pedestrian deaths would decline. After all, millions of motorists were slashing their driving time and hewing to social distancing measures.

The opposite happened.

Empty roads allowed some to drive much faster than before. Some police chiefs eased enforcement, wary of face-to-face contact. For reasons that psychologists and transit safety experts are just beginning to explain, drivers also seemed to get angrier.

Dr. David Spiegel, director of Stanford Medical School's Center on Stress and Health, said many drivers were grappling with what he calls "salience saturation."

"We're so saturated with fears about the virus and what it's going to do," Dr. Spiegel said. "People feel that they get a pass on other threats."

Dr. Spiegel said another factor was "social disengagement," which deprives people of social contact, a major source of pleasure, support and comfort. Combine that loss with overloading our capacity to gauge risks, Dr. Spiegel said, and people are not paying as much attention to driving safely.

"If they do, they don't care about it that much," Dr. Spiegel said. "There's the feeling that the rules are suspended and all bets are off."

A traffic sign on Coal Avenue in Albuquerque. A pedestrian was struck and killed in December at the intersection of Coal and Tulane Drive by a suspected drunk driver who fled the scene. Adria Malcolm for The New York Times

Crashes killed more than 6,700 pedestrians in 2020, up about 5 percent from the estimated 6,412 the year before, according to the Governors Highway Safety Association.

Based on another commonly used road safety metric — vehicle miles traveled — the group projected that the pedestrian fatality rate spiked about 21 percent in 2020 as deaths climbed sharply even though people drove much less that year, the largest ever year-over-year increase. And preliminary data from 2021 indicates yet another increase in the number of pedestrian deaths.

While other developed countries have made strides in reducing pedestrian deaths over the last several years, the pandemic has intensified several trends that have pushed the United States in the other direction. Crashes killing pedestrians climbed 46 percent over the last decade, compared with a 5 percent increase for all other crashes, according to the Governors Highway Safety Association.

Angie Schmitt, who describes pedestrian deaths as a “silent epidemic” in a new book, said the reasons included an aging population, in which older pedestrians are more vulnerable, and the growth of the Sun Belt region, where cities were designed after World War II to prioritize speed over safety. And ballooning sizes of S.U.V.s and trucks, which have grown heavier with higher front ends, strike people on foot with greater force than before.

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Following decades in which traffic fatalities declined in the United States, Ms. Schmitt noted that such deaths began climbing in 2009, when smaller sedans still accounted for most vehicles sold.

“Now, about three out of four new vehicles are pickup trucks, vans or S.U.V.s,” Ms. Schmitt said. “Cars are getting bigger, faster and deadlier.”

Others warn that since new vehicles have grown larger and safer for the people inside them, with features like lane-departure warnings and rearview cameras, some drivers are emboldened to dismiss the risks to pedestrians.

More than 6,700 pedestrians were killed in crashes in 2020. Adria Malcolm for The New York Times

“There’s a portion of the population that is incredibly frustrated, enraged, and some of that behavior shows up in their driving,” said Mark Hallenbeck, director of the Washington State Transportation Center at the University of Washington. “We in our vehicles are given anonymity in this giant metal box around us, and we act out in ways that we wouldn’t face to face.”

The streets of Albuquerque, where Pronoy Bhattacharya was killed in the hit-and-run, showcase the challenges that pedestrians face. Around the sprawling metro area, home to almost one million people, drivers routinely run red lights or speed past stop signs. Cars without license plates abound on Albuquerque’s roads.

Despite such behavior, residents say they can go years without seeing drivers pulled over for violations of any kind. After the boy’s death, readers flooded The Albuquerque Journal with emails assailing local authorities after having witnessed lawless driving on a daily basis.

Steve Schackley, 72, said he had not seen more than a couple of traffic stops during the 16 years he has been in the city. “People do what they want when there’s almost no enforcement,” said Mr. Shackley, a professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley.

### **The Coronavirus Pandemic: Key Things to Know**

**Covid boosters.** Data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed that booster shots against the coronavirus lose much of their potency after about four months, adding to evidence suggesting that some Americans may need a fourth dose.

Aggressive drivers occasionally get caught. In October, the police arrested a 26-year-old man who was reportedly intoxicated, carrying a handgun and driving at a speed of 140 miles per hour on one of the city's main avenues.

Street racing is another problem. When a woman was arrested in 2020 after killing a pedestrian on Central Avenue, her boyfriend told officers they were racing home in separate vehicles, "a game in their relationship," according to a court filing. In another recent tragedy, sheriff's deputies said the driver of a Ford pickup truck was street racing at 90 miles per hour when he slammed into a car pulling out of a Roman Catholic abbey, killing a 35-year-old priest.

Across the country, overall traffic fatalities — not just crashes killing pedestrians — are also rising at a record pace. Nearly 32,000 people were killed in vehicle crashes in the first nine months of 2021, a 12 percent increase from the same period in 2020, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. It was the highest number of fatalities during the first nine months of any year since 2006 and the highest percentage increase during the first nine months in the reporting system's history.

In the crash that killed Pronoy, the driver was at the helm of an all-terrain vehicle. Such vehicles are illegal on Albuquerque streets but are still commonly seen around the city. Video footage showed the driver, Sergio Almanza, drinking at a bar before the crash.

Pronoy's mother, Dr. Deepshikha Nag Chowdhury, a gastroenterologist at an Albuquerque hospital, publicly pleaded with authorities to find the driver in the weeks that followed. After fleeing the scene and going into hiding, Mr. Almanza surrendered to U.S. Marshals on Jan. 31.

Mr. Bhattacharya, who immigrated to the United States from India two decades ago, suffered a facial fracture in addition to losing his son. He said the crash had also shattered some of his long-held views.

"It's ironic that I told so many friends how crossing the street was so safe in the United States compared with India," said Mr. Bhattacharya, who works in information technology. "I always thought we'd be safer here."

Aditya Bhattacharya suffered a facial fracture in the crash that took his son's life. Adria Malcolm for The New York Times

Albuquerque's police chief, Harold Medina, was blunt in assessing the situation. With the department also facing a surge in homicides and an increase in armed robbery cases, he contended resources and personnel were spread thin at a time when tempers were flaring.

"We're seeing erratic behavior in the way people are acting and their patience levels," Chief Medina said in an interview. "Everybody's been pushed. This is one of the most stressful times in memory."

In addition to more aggressive driving, Chief Medina cited an increase in drunken driving and a growing homeless population as other factors, explaining that some pedestrians killed in the city were living on the street.

Still, Chief Medina insisted the situation was changing. Following Pronoy's death, he said the department was bolstering enforcement, issuing more than 4,600 traffic citations in January compared with about 3,450 the same month a year ago.

Ava Montoya, a spokeswoman for Mayor Tim Keller, said Albuquerque was improving traffic enforcement and initiating several measures, including improved lighting and the use of mobile speed enforcement devices and radar-equipped speed vans.

Still, while leaders in Albuquerque and other cities seek fixes, others following pedestrian fatalities around the country are expressing alarm over the endurance of pandemic-related factors.

Art Markman, a cognitive scientist at the University of Texas at Austin, said that such emotions partly reflected “two years of having to stop ourselves from doing things that we’d like to do.”

“We’re all a bit at the end of our rope on things,” Dr. Markman said. “When you get angry in the car, it generates energy — and how do you dissipate that energy? Well, one way is to put your foot down a little bit more on the accelerator.”



# The Charlotte Observer



LOCAL

## ‘Gutted by transportation’: Black Charlotte leaders voice concerns on sales tax plan

BY HANNAH SMOOT

UPDATED MARCH 02, 2022 8:36 AM



Charlotte, NC's tremendous growth is adding to all the traffic, making it hard to get around. One plan could help alleviate congestion, but it comes at a high price. BY KEVIN KEISTER | JEFF SINER



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**Black political leaders in Charlotte pressured city officials on Tuesday to rethink a county sales tax for transportation network projects.**

**The 1-cent sales tax, which could land on a ballot later this year, would fund transportation projects like redesigning the bus system, part of the city’s \$13.5 billion mobility transformation plan.**

**But members of the local Black Political Caucus, speaking at a news conference, said they’re concerned the sales tax and subsequent mobility projects like streetcar expansions could hurt Black Charlotteans.**

**“These projects will significantly affect the Black community’s access to quick and efficient transportation, affordable housing, ability to maintain home ownership, upper mobility and other economic opportunities,” Black Political Caucus Charlotte-Mecklenburg chairwoman Stephanie Sneed said at the uptown Charlotte news conference.**

**“Prior transit and light rail projects have already proven these in such areas as Double Oaks, Optimist Park and Wilmore, which has alone [lost 40% of its Black residents](#) due to transit light rail development,” Sneed added. “In the past, our communities have been gutted by transportation.”**

**The caucus is asking the city to consider three initiatives to protect Black Charlotteans: anti-displacement measures, affordable housing requirements near light rail stations and increased minority vendor participation in transit projects.**

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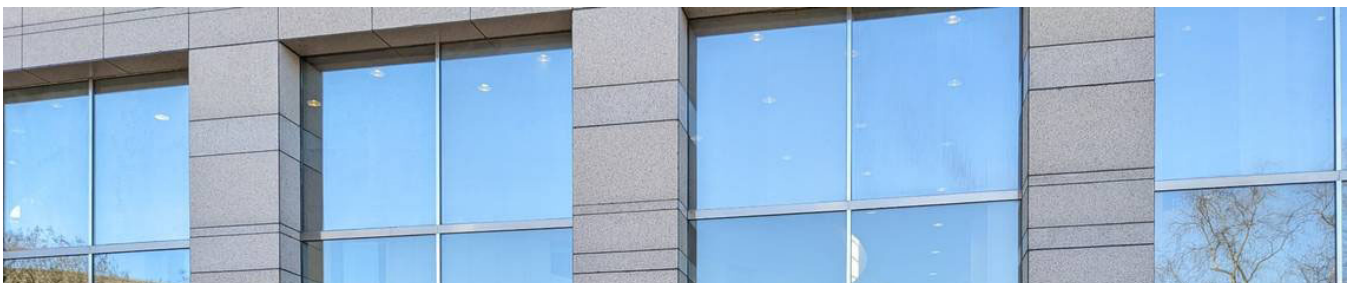
LOCAL

**[How Charlotte’s light rail sped up a ‘takeover’ of historically-Black neighborhoods](#)**

AUGUST 20, 2021 10:35 AM

**“Transportation development is economic development,” Sneed said. “But who is it for?**

**“Is it for us? Is it for the young millenials that move into the area? Is it for those whose pockets are already deep?”**





Charlotte Black Political Caucus members voice concerns on the city's proposal to implement a 1-cent sales tax to fund transportation programs. Hannah Smoot

## SALES TAX PLAN

The earliest the sales tax plan could get on a local ballot is November, chief advocacy and strategy officer at the Charlotte Regional Business Alliance [Kelly O'Brien](#) told the Observer in December.

But there's no publicly announced timeline for the sales tax.

Some city and county officials are traveling to Austin , Texas, on Wednesday to learn how that city has handled changes to its transportation system, city council member Malcolm Graham said Tuesday.

"Part of the trip is fact finding," Graham said. "We'll kick the tires in Austin and compare it to Charlotte, and try to see how we can move forward."

Charlotte officials have previously heard from Austin transportation leaders ahead of a 2020 vote in Austin to approve [a \\$7.1 billion transit plan](#), funded in part by a roughly 4% property tax increase.

Graham, a member of the Black Political Caucus, said the requests were reasonable, but stopped short of backing a requirement to tie the sales tax increase to the three initiatives.

"The devil's in the details," he said. "We have a long way to go."

### 3 REQUIREMENTS THE CAUCUS WANTS

The Black Political Caucus touted Austin as a good example of supporting Black residents amid transit redesign.

Austin allocated [4.2% of its transit plan budget](#) to anti-displacement measures, according to the Black Political Caucus. The caucus would like to see a similar proposal in Charlotte.

The group is also concerned that light rail expansion will lead to an explosion of developments with high rental prices. So the caucus would like to see Charlotte require housing developments within 1 mile of light rail stops to make 10% of units affordable housing.

Many other cities, including Atlanta and Austin, include disadvantaged business enterprise programs in comprehensive transit plans, Black Political Caucus members said.

Members would like to see Charlotte officials make a commitment to a disadvantaged business enterprise program and a commitment to making improvements to minority vendor participation.

This story was originally published March 1, 2022 5:57 PM.


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