

Road Safety May Be in the Works for Wake Co.

By Sarah E. Kiser

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It happens often, and it's a tragedy every time. A distracted driver or a dark road with no crosswalk. Or maybe the bike lane ended, and you just barely slowed down enough to avoid colliding with the cyclist merging in front of you. It was a close call; your heart beats a little faster. Somewhere else the same thing occurs, however, it's too close, and that is when the tragedy occurs.

Transportation related deaths continue to be a problem in North Carolina. Our tar heel state had the 5th highest number of traffic fatalities in the nation in 2017. Though transportation fatalities in the state were 2.6% less in 2017 than in 2016, 1,412 people in 2017 died as a result of motor vehicle crashes, according to the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#).

In Wake county, there exists a similar problem. In 2017, there were 31,254 reportable crashes according to the document "North Carolina 2017 Traffic Crash Facts" produced by the North Carolina Department of Transportation. [Watch For Me NC](#), a NCDOT initiative, reports that over a five-year period of Triangle police reports show that 46% of pedestrians struck by cars are were black, and 39% were white, while a "disproportionate number of cyclists were black".

Wake County Commissioners are considering an initiative that seeks to reduce pedestrian deaths. At the March 25 Growth and Sustainability committee meeting, commissioners heard from N.C. Vision Zero, a statewide initiative, part of a global effort, to eliminate transportation related injuries and deaths especially for pedestrians, 198 of whom in NC died from being struck by a car in 2015, and cyclists, of whom 15 were killed in NC in 2016, Vision Zero reports online. N.C. Vision Zero focuses on improved engineering for roads and vehicles, driver's education, law enforcement, emergency response, and a public that makes safer choices, its website explains. The organization seeks to switch the paradigm from prioritizing "speed, convenience, affordability" to putting "safety, multimodal alternatives, accessibility, [and] equitable results" first, according to a presentation delivered to commissioners. The program began in Sweden where it has reduced road fatalities by 50% since 1997 according to N.C. Vision Zero.

If the board of commissioners chooses to go forward with the initiative, Wake County would join Robeson Co., Asheville, Durham, Wake Forest, Greensboro, Greenville and Charlotte as communities dedicated to making mobility safe for all users. Wake county residents could expect "lower speed limits, better enforcement of laws requiring motorists to yield to pedestrians [and] street design to improve pedestrian safety" according to the presentation.

Denise Hogan, Clerk of Board of Commissioners, said that Capital Area Metropolitan Organization (CAMPO) will be the lead agency on the project. At the meeting, according to a draft of the minutes, City Manager David Ellis asked about next steps, and Commissioner Sig

Hutchinson recommended a resolution to encourage the municipalities of Wake county to support the initiative, but no decisions were made to go forwards with the project.

Hutchinson is passionate about taking the project forwards. “This whole philosophy around vision zero is built around in part education in part engineering” to “encourage municipalities to think about how we design roads and sidewalks to be safer and to encourage citizens to be more aware. There’s all kinds of things that can be done.”

Hutchinson, whose specialty is land use and transportation, wants to see lowering speed limits in urban areas, improved crosswalks, and roads being designed or improved to be “complete streets”, a philosophy based upon accommodating every mode of transportation.” These measures can save lives and even prevent accidents: “The difference between being hit by a car at 20 mph..and at 40 mph is being taken to the hospital and taken to the morgue,” he said. Hutchinson hopes to increase the amount of bike lanes and sidewalks using the open space, parks, and greenway bond. Safe routes for schools, another issue the board is considering, could become a part of the effort as well. Traffic calming, “engineering strategies that encourage people to drive slower,” he explained, are a possibility as well.

Hutchinson, who is vice-chair of CAMPO, cited a statistic that pedestrian accidents and deaths are six times higher in vulnerable communities than elsewhere. This is a significant issue for him: “People are needlessly dying because we’re not implementing strategies that are out there.” Putting crosswalks in these communities can help prevent those crashes, he said. “It’s stunning when you focus on this work, then you can significantly reduce accidents and death.”

The project may go onto a work session, or more likely a resolution before the full board, said Hutchinson. “There’s no reason to not support it.”

If Wake county adopts it, it can encourage the municipalities within Wake co. to adopt these values as they design roads, side walks, and crosswalks since the county does not direct road construction, but the cities themselves. “This is something they need to pay attention to,” Hutchinson said.