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Bump for Walsh on city's mean streets



BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

In 2015, bouquets of flowers adorned a light post at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Beacon Street, where a bicyclist was struck and killed.

By [Nestor Ramos](#) and [Steve Annear](#) GLOBE STAFF MAY 18, 2017

On at least one thing, everyone seemed to agree.

“This is where I’m going to get myself in trouble right now,” Mayor Martin J. Walsh said — correctly, it turns out — before launching into a brief discourse about pedestrians and bicyclists being more careful on the roads during a Tuesday WGBH radio interview.

“Pedestrians need to put their head up when they’re walking down the street, take your headphones off, cross in the crosswalk, follow the lights,” Walsh said. “Even bicyclists, when you’re riding; a car can’t stop on a dime.”

To the untrained listener, all this may have sounded innocuous or even mundane — the sort of thing many an uncle has gotten slightly fired up about over Sunday dinner. But to those who have been pushing for years to make the streets safer for pedestrians and bicyclists, it sounded like victim-blaming — perhaps even a callous affront to those whose lives have been lost on Boston’s roadways.

“On behalf of those victims, we also ask that you apologize for the comments you made on the air,” read [a letter](#) from the Massachusetts Vision Zero Coalition to Walsh this week.

Hundreds of people wearing yellow stickers that read “Safe Streets Now” gathered at City Hall Plaza Friday in response to recent comments from Boston Mayor Martin Walsh.

By Thursday, that coalition, a collection of nonprofits, businesses, and civic organizations that seeks to eliminate street fatalities and crashes statewide, had organized a “Streets Are for People” vigil at City Hall Plaza, planned for 8 a.m. Friday. Attendees were asked to dress in black for “a silent moment of solidarity with the victims of traffic violence.”

The vigil coincides with National Bike to Work Day, which is also expected to bring bicyclists to City Hall on Friday morning.



DAVID L RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

A bike lane on Massachusetts Avenue in Boston.

In a news release e-mailed Thursday afternoon, Walsh announced a \$1 million increase in next year's Vision Zero funding. The money is dedicated to the Neighborhood Slow Streets program, which allows neighborhoods and other groups to apply for city-installed traffic calming measures. Better funding for the program was among the list of requests in the coalition letter.

In an interview Thursday, Walsh said people are "taking what they want to take out of" his remarks.

"I think I said, 'Bicycles, pedestrians, and cars need to be careful,'" Walsh said. "The roads aren't owned by any one group." Though not eager to keep the debate roiling, he said he wouldn't back away from that message, and asked for "more understanding and working together."

The group invited Walsh to attend the vigil, but he said his schedule would keep him away from City Hall on Friday morning.

A petition calling for safer streets will be passed around at the service, then hand-delivered to the mayor's office, organizers say. There will be no formal remarks or speakers.

“We are gathering at City Hall not only to get the attention of the mayor, but more importantly, to demonstrate solidarity with the thousands of Bostonians who've been impacted by traffic violence,” said Stacy Thompson, executive director of LivableStreets Alliance, one of several groups that constitute the Vision Zero Coalition.

“The bottom line is that if the administration doesn't commit more resources and pick up the pace, we will lose more lives on our streets,” she said.

Others said Walsh's comments were based on misconceptions and inaccuracies. Though the mayor's comments focused on people wearing headphones or darting in and out of traffic, data show that at least four of the 15 pedestrians killed in Boston last year were over 65. Two others were children under 3. The ages of five of the 15 victims have not been released, according to data from the pedestrian advocacy group WalkBoston.

“The rhetoric that he was using was not the Vision Zero rhetoric that we expect from a mayor who has adopted the Vision Zero policy,” said Becca Wolfson, executive director of the Boston Cyclists Union, another coalition member group. “He seemed to get that before he said these things.”

The city committed to a Vision Zero policy in 2015. The concept, said Brendan Kearney, communications director for WalkBoston, “is grounded in the premise that people make mistakes — so the streets should be designed to minimize injury and loss of life no matter how people are getting around.”

“We should not be blaming the people that were hit and killed,” Kearney said in an e-mail.

Asked about the offense his remarks caused, Walsh said some are hearing only what they want to hear. His message, he said, was that everyone needs to be more careful in a city full of not only impatient drivers, but bicyclists and pedestrians as well.