

digboston

INTERSECTIONAL POLITICS (A CRASH-NOT-ACCIDENT REPORT)

June 8, 2017 By KYLIE OBERMEIER



When it comes to bike safety and infrastructure in Greater Boston, there's a dangerous gap between the promises that cities make and the reality where rubber meets the road

Of all the places for a cyclist or pedestrian to be killed, the intersection of Mass Ave and Somerville Ave in Cambridge is an unsurprising nightmare.

Outside of the Porter Square T stop on a random day, an 18-wheeler and an orange cement truck fly by. They're followed by other ridiculously big rigs and construction vehicles. Plus buses. Lots of them. The 83, 77, and 96 routes combined bring 156 buses through the square every day.

Half a block down Mass Ave, another 18-wheeler sits in the unprotected bike lane, emergency blinkers on with the hatch open. Cyclists swerve into the street to avoid it. Some of them get a head start on the light to avoid colliding with a car while passing the truck.

USEFUL TERMS

VISION ZERO

"A strategy to eliminate all traffic fatalities and severe injuries, while increasing safe, healthy, equitable mobility for all." (Definition via City of Cambridge)

CITYSMART

"This program began as a pilot [in Cambridge] to test how social marketing affects transportation choices. Based on successful programs in Europe, Australia and the United States, [the goal is] to shift approximately 10% of single-occupant vehicle trips to more sustainable modes, such as walking, bicycling and transit." (Definition via City of Cambridge)

COMPLETE STREETS

"An approach that integrates people and place in the planning, design, construction, operation, and maintenance of our transportation networks. This helps to ensure streets are safe for people of all ages and abilities, balance the needs of different modes, and support local land uses, economies, cultures, and natural environments." (Definition via National Complete Streets Coalition)

CRASH NOT ACCIDENT

"Before the labor movement, factory owners would say 'it was an accident' when American workers were injured in unsafe conditions. Before the movement to combat drunk driving, intoxicated drivers would say 'it was an accident' when they crashed their cars. Planes don't have accidents. They crash. Cranes don't have accidents. They collapse. And as a society, we expect answers and solutions. Traffic crashes are fixable problems, caused by dangerous streets and unsafe drivers. They are not accidents. Let's stop using the word 'accident' today." (Definition via Vision Zero Network)

Over the next few minutes, at least five pedestrians cross Mass Ave against the light. To get to the Shaw's Market from the T station, a person has to traverse three marked crosswalks, one after another. At a quick glance, it's easy to think that a particular signal means it is safe to cross in one direction when it's actually safe for other crossers.

If you live anywhere in Greater Boston, you're probably familiar with this scene. This busy junction on the border of two major cities is where nine lanes converge into a messy Y, a chaotic confluence of pedestrians, cyclists, and large to very large moving hunks of metal.

And it's not even rush hour.

"It's always been a dangerous intersection," says Joseph Poirier, a bike activist from Central Square and researcher at the Center for Community Innovation in Berkeley. "Everyone has always known."

Despite the well-known hazards, problems persist while municipal officials, a lot of street safety advocates say, are not acting urgently or adequately enough to make vital changes. In their own defense, city officials maintain that improving infrastructure takes a lot of time and energy, perhaps most of all in trying to negotiate between the often conflicting demands of residents.

Cambridge is a particular point of contention. In theory, the city should be safer to traverse—its "[CitySmart](#)" program encourages walking, biking, and public transit over driving, while the city's pedestrian and bike plans propose

numerous ways Cambridge can be made easier to navigate. Last March, the city adopted “[Complete Streets](#)” and “[Vision Zero](#)” policies, both progressive planning strategies adopted in urban areas across the country that together aim to make streets safe and fatality free for everyone. And yet, deadly thoroughfares and intersections like the corner of Mass Ave and Somerville Ave survive.

“I think there’s something inherently wrong with the traffic flow there,” says Helen Meldrum, a Bentley University professor who drives through the intersection every day.

Ruth Ryals, who has lived in and navigated Porter Square for 24 years, throws further shade: “I don’t think the signage and the signals are all that straightforward.”

“You’re standing there with a confusing *Can I go? Or Can’t I go?*”

MIXED PROGRESS, MIXED OPINION

Last October, cyclist Joe Lavins was struck and killed by an 18-wheeler while riding from his home in Lexington to the Cambridge biotechnology company where he worked. Exactly what happened is unknown, but the sight was unmistakably gruesome: Lavin’s battered bike lay under the Ryder tractor-trailer, while police lay two separate sheets over his mangled body on the street.

A week after Lavins was killed, people gathered at the scene not only to mourn him but also to demand safer streets for cyclists. Lavins’ is not the first ghost bike to mark where a life was lost on a Cambridge street, but the well-known danger of this particular square seemed to strike a sharp nerve. While the official cause of Lavin’s deadly crash may be unknown, it’s clear that deaths like his ought to be avoidable in a region in which cities tout their efforts to push polluting cars off the road and promote sustainable alternatives. Cambridge, for one, even hypes its bike friendliness and “robust bicycle infrastructure.”

So what’s Cambridge doing about the dreaded intersection of Mass Ave and Somerville Ave? And about these critical infrastructure issues in general?



Last October, cyclist Joe Lavins was struck and killed by an 18-wheeler in Porter Square while riding from his home in Lexington to the Cambridge biotechnology company where he worked / Photo by Kylie Obermeier

More than half a year has passed since Lavins was killed and since the movement for safer streets in Cambridge intensified. So far, though, results have been mixed: While there's been steady progress in some areas, in others the issue still simmers.

Porter Square is an example of the latter. Officials have completed some of the more minor fixes [they presented to the public last November](#)—adding new signs and additional green bike lanes, adjusting a painted “crossbike” that connects the Mass Ave jughandle to the Somerville Ave bike lane.

Bigger plans for Porter were actually proposed by the city's Department of Traffic, Parking & Transportation (TP&T) a few months before Lavins was killed. Most significantly, the recommended improvements included retiming the confusing signals. Nonetheless, it's been nearly eight months since Lavins was killed, and cyclists still

have to brave the same difficult crosshairs with a few new token signs and guiding markers on the ground.

According to Joseph Barr, the TP&T director, larger fixes haven't happened, at least in part, because of pushback from some residents who are concerned about how the proposed retiming might impact the busy Porter Square shopping center, around which much of the madness is concentrated. Cambridge officials have their hands full with other projects and in various forums have noted that the city is trying to account for many seemingly opposing interests.

Still, it's obvious that some serious improvements are needed. And soon. Even Barr admits from his own experience that the intersection lends itself to danger.

"I have personally experienced biking through [Porter] ... that it's faster if you behave like a car," Barr says, "so there's incentive to do that even if it's significantly safer if you do use the jughandle."

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER DOORING

"Cambridge is flat and the weather isn't as bad as people make it out to be."

Nathanael Fillmore, co-founder of the grassroots activist group Cambridge Bicycle Safety and postdoctoral researcher at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, extolls the cycling possibilities in the city.

"It takes an hour and a half to walk across Cambridge, but only 30 minutes to bike from one end to the other, about the same amount of time as it takes to drive and find parking. Biking is the perfect way to get around Cambridge, but it needs to be safer and less stressful so that people of all ages and abilities feel comfortable taking advantage of it."

Fillmore went to grad school in Madison, Wisconsin, where a network of multiuse paths across the city totally separates bikes from car traffic. In Madison, he says he didn't know a single person who had experienced a car door opening on them while biking, and his anecdotal observation checks out. Statistically, the rate of injury is much lower in Madison. Here, Fillmore says it seems like more than half the cyclists he knows have been doored. There were [385 reported crashes in Cambridge in 2016](#) alone, many of which involved doors and oblivious drivers. While some victims walk away with scratches, many are hospitalized, while others have faced worse fates.

Five cyclists have been killed in Cambridge over the last 15 years. One victim was Amanda Phillips, a 27-year-old nursing student who was [doored and then struck](#) by a landscaping truck last June while she was biking through Inman Square, where

CAMBRIDGE SPEAKS

At a Cambridge City Council meeting last October, more than two dozen residents and advocates from neighboring municipalities showed up to give comments about their cycling experiences, and to speak in favor of improved infrastructure and safety measures. Some of their clear and pointed sentiments, as recorded by the city, are excerpted below (bold emphases added) ...

- Jaime Masferrer ... stated that his wife is asking him why he is bicycling currently. He stated that **the risk of riding a bicycle in Cambridge is extremely high** ... He stated that decisions need to be made today.
- Ari Ofsevit ... stated that he has lived in Cambridge for five years and bikes daily ... He stated that ... **Mass Ave was designed in the 1950s and it needs to be better for everyone** ... He stated that we cannot rest on our laurels and the future is directed towards more sustainable goals. He stated that parking cannot be the top priority in Cambridge.
- Lindsey Sudbury ... stated that every day she bikes with her toddler where she drops her child off in Inman Square and along Mass Ave to MIT. She stated that **there are benefits for her biking and passing her community on the street every day and the convenience of not waiting for public transportation and also health benefits**. She stated that she follows the rules of the road but even if she does her best, a truck may not see her. She stated that protected bike lanes are needed.
- Rebecca Wolfson ... member of the Boston Cyclist Union ... stated that ... **Cambridge has the ability to show leadership and innovation with pop-up protected bike lanes**. She noted that four of the last fatalities involved trucks. She added that truck side guards are not fixing this.
- Matt Carty ... stated that **the only boldness that is needed is to get past fear of the unknown**. He stated that it is not an us versus them thing. He stated that we can have safe streets for cyclists which improves safety for drivers which is a win-win.

Hampshire Street meets Cambridge Street. The day before, city officials and residents had gathered to discuss a traffic study and congestion problems in the Inman area. During that time cyclist after cyclist echoed the same pressing sentiment: *Cycling in Cambridge is scary.*

“There’s literally too many [alarming incidents] to recall,” says Cambridge City Councilor Nadeem Mazen. A dedicated bike rider who is often seen around City Hall with his helmet in hand, Mazen shared the details of a close call he once had on Mass Ave. He was doored, flew over his handlebars, and was nearly hit by a truck as he lay on his chest.

“I learned when I got up, having not died by about three inches, that someone had died there the prior week in exactly the same place in exactly the same way,” Mazen says.

According to [one municipal data set](#), the number of crashes went down, at least between 2002 and 2012, relative to the number of miles traveled by cyclists, which dramatically increased in that same period. At the same time, as the [Cambridge open source crash data portal](#) shows, avoidable incidents still occur all around the city, while thoroughfares like Cambridge Street and Broadway remain crash hot spots.

Meanwhile, as many of the city council’s measures to address safety problems are watered down, if not dismissed entirely or overshadowed by other projects in the bureaucratic rigamarole, innumerable cyclists worry that their next dooring could be literally right around the corner.

INTELLIGENT DESIGN

Andrew McFarland walks toward Inman Square from the LivableStreets office in Cambridgeport. He carries a white foam core silhouette of a nearly life-size cyclist, a chalk outline of a corpse, with his message to the public highlighted in bright blue ink: “#crashnotaccident”; “#visionzero”; “A cyclist was killed here 06/22/16.”

World Remembrance Day is approaching, and people from around the planet will gather in honor of those who have been killed in road crashes. McFarland is heading to the spot where Amanda Phillips was hit to affix his small memorial to a lamppost, but hers is just one of many symbols that advocates will put up around the city.

[LivableStreets](#) is a nonprofit alliance that considers the needs of cyclists, drivers, pedestrians, and public transit users in its transportation advocacy. Drivers are not their adversaries, and the group’s priority is for streets to be as safe as possible for as many people as possible. McFarland says that while education and traffic enforcement are critical, design is key. Namely, LivableStreets fights for transportation networks that are easily accessible and well connected.

“Good street design makes for good behavior,” McFarland says. “What has been proven and tested is improving street infrastructure.”

Advocates like McFarland have been down this road before with Cambridge. In 2015, the city approved a pedestrian and bicycle plan that called for the kind of infrastructural improvements that LivableStreets and like-minded voices champion: separate bike lanes, networks rather than patchworks, properly timed signals, and traffic-calming measures. Furthermore, last March the city adopted “Complete Streets” and “Vision Zero” policies, which emphasize that streets should be designed based on the needs of *all* users—“regardless of age, ability, or mode of transportation”—and aim to reduce traffic fatalities and injuries to zero with the mindset that they are controllable. But when asked for this article, advocates and city councilors alike say that such plans are ignored all too often.

“Time and time again, the bike plan [that was] passed is passed over for the convenience of short-term interests,” Mazon says. Compounding the insult, he added, is that Cambridge has not been adequately incorporating the bike plan into its [five year construction plan](#).

Often times, the “interests” of which Mazon speaks trace back to the reluctance of some residents to lose parking. According to Poirier, the Berkeley via Central Square cycle advocate and civic researcher, the ongoing reconstruction of Pearl Street that began in 2015, for example, preserved parking spots at the expense of a protected

bike lane that the cycling community demanded. In another case, last October the council [requested](#) that “bike-bus lanes” be implemented, but eight months later that prospect seems unlikely. Instead of setting precautions ahead of time, Cambridge is waiting until the project is completed to potentially reevaluate how the road will be shared. Susanne Rasmussen, the city’s director of environmental and transportation planning, says that initial attempts to ban street parking during the day—to allow more room for cars, buses, and bikes to share the road—were met with hefty opposition from the community.

Other orders passed last year have met a similar fate. A call for a protected track as part of the reconstruction of Huron Ave near Fresh Pond was passed up for a simple bike lane with a three-inch painted buffer. Rasmussen says protected lanes would be difficult to accommodate with the street’s overhead trolley buses. Plus the whole parking spot thing.

The same goes for Mass Ave, a notoriously dangerous road where many Cambridge cyclists crash every year (along with several on the other side of the river in Boston, where two of the most troubled intersections in the city are off Mass Ave in Back Bay). Barr says that standard bikes lanes are planned for stretches that are currently under construction between Porter Square and Harvard Square. Indeed, a pilot program featuring [pop-up flex-post lanes](#) was planned to start before winter in the most critical places, with “a much more comprehensive network” to come in spring. Flex posts—skinny plastic dividers grounded in a flexible base—are a relatively cheap and quick solution, as opposed to lengthy, expensive reconstruction projects like the holy grail protected bike lane on Western Ave, where there’s an actual concrete partition and parked cars between cyclists and moving vehicles on one side, and a sidewalk for pedestrians on the other.

Activists celebrated last December when flex posts popped up on two blocks of Mass Ave. But it’s almost summer, and the “much more comprehensive network” is thus far only those couple of blocks. While a full mile of Cambridge Street is planned to be installed in June, only a roughly .4-mile stretch of Brattle Street and .2-mile fragment of Mass Ave are slated for construction this year. The timeline ends there—Barr says that he, for one, is eager to start planning more pop-ups, but that the city has been busy with those mentioned, while officials want to learn from the experiment before planning for more.



Amanda Phillips was doored and then struck by a landscaping truck last June while she was biking through Inman Square; the day before, city officials and residents had gathered to discuss a traffic study and congestion problems in the Inman area | Photo by Chris Faraone

Cyclists like Fillmore are trying to be patient, but they are also frustrated with the ongoing program's speed and scope.

"No realistic trip can be made on what has been planned so far," Fillmore says. "It's not a network." He added that while a lot of parties may be disappointed, it's reasonable for the city to see how long the pop-ups ultimately take to install as well as how much they cost, among other factors, before planning a broader system of lanes.

McFarland of LivableStreets echoed Fillmore, saying that at the very least, Cantabrigians need one protected route from one end of Cambridge to the other. He says the current "patchwork" is inadequate, and the city should be thinking much more comprehensively.

"When bike planners at NYC DOT are working on comparable projects, they are always asking the question of how does this connect to nearby biking infrastructure? How does this contribute to the greater vision of a safe, citywide bike network?" McFarland says. "Whether the project is short-term or not, they commit ... We'd like the City of Cambridge to adopt a similar strategic approach, which we aren't really seeing with these pop-ups."

At the same time, Inman Square, where Amanda Phillips rode her bike for the last time, is being completely overhauled. In the lead-up to construction, many cyclists hoped that something called the “peanutabout,” a design commissioned by the Boston Cyclists Union, would be chosen. The large peanut-shaped roundabout intended to create a slow, steady flow of traffic by removing stoplights and instating a yielding priority that would give pedestrians, then cyclists, then drivers the right of way. About 40 percent of residents preferred this option in a city survey given in January, with the remaining 60 percent split between three other, more traditional designs.

In the end, Cambridge decision-makers opted for a hybrid of the three intersection designs, which would involve building separated, raised bike lanes. Plus adding new floating bus stops (in which buses pause in the travel lane instead of the bike lane), removing a park, and eliminating about half of the square’s metered parking spaces, [prompting concern](#) from business owners. Activist groups like Cambridge Bike Safety are also [critical](#), though for different reasons: They denounce the plan’s “four-lane highway” as unsafe and in conflict with the traffic-calming goals of Vision Zero. Transportation Director Barr says that the peanutabout would complicate fire station access, plus would require an unpopular two-way Springfield Street and potentially create a car backlog with its pedestrian-first yielding priority.

“It’s being conservative on the city’s part, but [the peanutabout] is a tough leap of faith,” says Barr.

While feelings of frustration with the rate of progress and concern about the long-term certainly persist, there are also reasons for activists to be hopeful. For one, last fall, Cambridge joined neighboring Somerville in lowering its speed limit to 25 mph. More so, City Manager Louis DePasquale [announced at a public meeting](#) in April that \$2 million is earmarked for Vision Zero initiatives in Cambridge’s 2018 budget, while an additional \$6 million is pledged for the Inman Square project alone. The [Cambridge Street pop-up](#) will eventually cover a full mile stretch from the Harvard Science Center Overpass to Inman Square and provide a long-awaited link for Cambridge Rindge and Latin students who cycle to school. Barr says the project has been going “surprisingly smoothly,” with minimal pushback from residents despite the parking removal involved.

EVERYBODY WALKS

“What about the little old lady or the disabled person who’s trying to cross the street?” Ruth Ryals, who lives just a few blocks from where Joe Lavins was killed, gives her unique perspective on the flow of traffic in Cambridge. “How are they going to fare in a phalanx of bikes?”

Ryals is fed up with what is often called the “bike lobby,” essentially advocates who primarily look out for cyclists. She thinks that too often in street safety discussions, the

focus is all on able-bodied folks and bikes while the most vulnerable populations—the elderly, the disabled, and children—are forgotten.

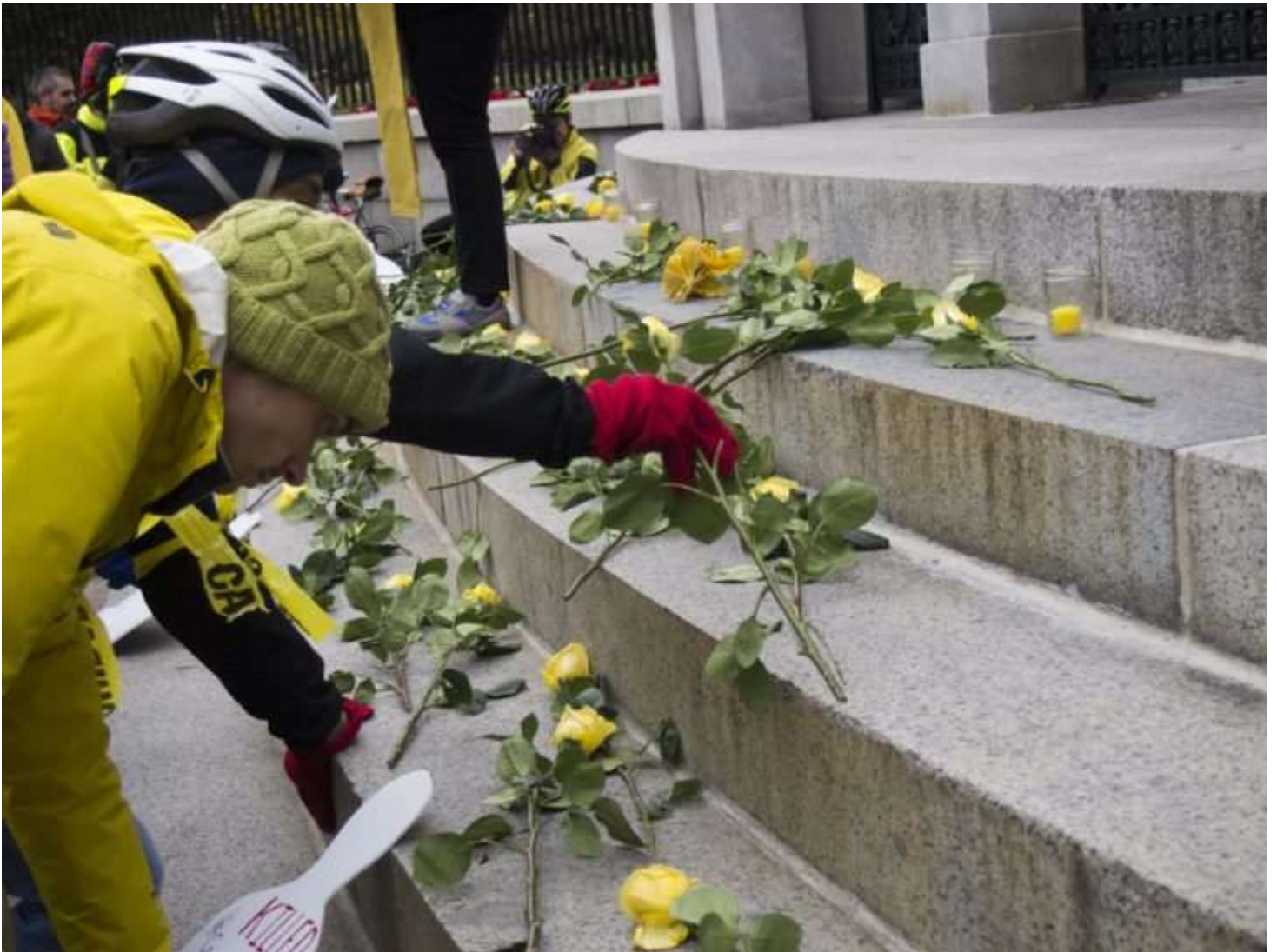
Ryals is a part of this vulnerable population; while active, she has a plate in her neck. If she falls while walking, she could at best break her hip and at worst become paraplegic. When it's icy or snowy outside, she has little choice but to drive. She often visits doctors in Brookline, which can take upwards of two hours via public transportation. She also cannot carry anything heavy. With the current bus and subway options, she says driving her own car is the only feasible means of getting around.

“We have to figure out a way that works for all of us: pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers,” she argues. “But pedestrians are the most vulnerable.”

Such concerns exist beyond the borders of Cambridge and Somerville. Last month, Boston Mayor Marty Walsh prompted major scorn from transportation activists after essentially putting the onus on walkers and bicyclists—as opposed to drivers—to avoid crashes. The City of Boston, [Walsh said](#), is “doing all [it] can” to keep people safe, while pedestrians “need to put their head up when they’re walking down the street, take your headphones off ... you’ve got to understand, cars are going to hit you.”

As a responsive [letter from the Vision Zero Coalition](#) pointed out, most people killed while walking are not the eyes-glued-to-their-smartphone, Beats by Dre-wearing millennials whom Walsh is likely imagining. [Statistics](#) collected by the pedestrian advocacy group WalkBoston show that of the 68 pedestrians with known ages killed in Massachusetts last year, 48 were older than 50.

“People get fired up about supporting bike infrastructure,” says Brendan Kearney, WalkBoston’s communications director. “Meanwhile everyone is a part of pedestrian infrastructure, but no one identifies as a pedestrian.”



On World Day of Remembrance in Boston last November, about 100 people marched up Beacon Hill to where Allie Warmuth was killed by a duck boat while riding her red moped last April / Photo by Kylie Obermeier

THE VISION

On a windy Sunday last November, about 100 people marched up Beacon Hill starting on the corner of Charles Street and Beacon Street, where Allie Warmuth was killed by a duck boat while riding her red moped last April. It's World Day of Remembrance, and people in Nepal, and Sierra Leone, and Portugal, and Paraguay, and dozens of other countries are also uniting for the same cause.

Residents are gathered in a circle, many holding yellow roses. Silhouettes of cyclists, which have become common public symbols for the region's bike advocacy movement, lean one after another against the State House steps. One such placard reads, "Killed by a crash not an accident"; another: "I made it, others didn't." At the end of the vigil,

everyone lays their yellow roses among the silhouettes, as if laying flowers at the grave of a loved one.

Only four people are scheduled to talk, but person after person takes the microphone to remember a lost loved one. The family of Eugene Thornberg, a Wayland resident killed in Lincoln last June while riding his bike to Walden Pond, mounts the steps. Ten of Thornberg's relatives are wearing yellow scarves and holding photos; they cry and clutch each other while his wife, Patrice Thornberg, recounts the incident and calls for change.

"If we can make one little change to make roads safer and save a life, it will be worth it," she says, struggling to get the words out. "When people hear Eugene Thornberg, I want them to know he was part of making roads safer."

Rev. Laura Everett, a bike advocate and the executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, leads the vigil. It's her second such tragic event in two months, as Everett recently led a vigil for [Rick Archer](#), who was killed in a hit-and-run crash in Back Bay. Everett wears a yellow stole and speaks as though as giving a sermon to a congregation, words flowing rhythmically. In a way, she *is* addressing a congregation, one united in mourning but also in hope, in a shared vision of zero road fatalities.



Everett begins a "litany to end road violence" and instructs the crowd to respond to her prayers with the refrain, "We need each other."

"When we are tempted to isolate," she calls, "remind us that we need each other."

"WE NEED EACH OTHER," the group responds.

"So wipe every tear from our eyes, move our elected officials to swift, swift action,

and lest we think we can repair the breach alone, we need each other."

"WE NEED EACH OTHER."

"Without vision, the people perish ... But we *have* a vision. Next year let us celebrate a year of no road fatalities. Next year ... a vision of zero in Massachusetts. We bless you

to walk and bike and drive safely towards that vision. We say proudly and bravely amen.”

Amen.

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