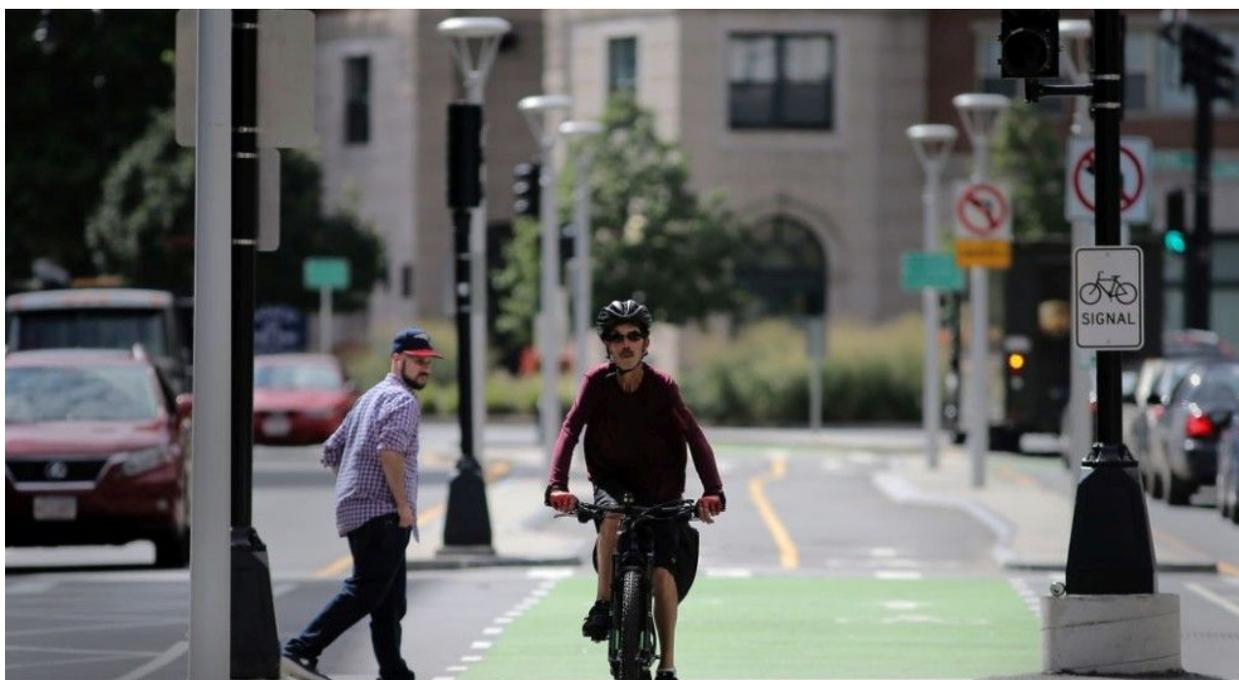




Pressure Mounts For Walsh to Deliver On Safer Streets



A cyclist rides along the new dual-direction protected bike lane that runs down the middle of Causeway Street in Boston on Sep. 26, 2018.

Lane Turner/Boston Globe via Getty Images

By Isaiah Thompson

May 8, 2019

A few weeks ago, Boston Mayor Marty Walsh unveiled his budget proposal for the city's next fiscal year - an annual ritual in which the mayor's priorities are laid out in line items and pie charts.

Among the four or five issues that made the first lines of the mayor's budget address - right after the calls for better schools and more affordable housing - was the goal of safer streets.

It's been more than three years since Walsh announced a "Vision Zero" plan to eliminate traffic-related fatalities and serious injuries. And the Walsh administration has invested significant funding and staff power toward street improvements to curb speeding and reign in dangerous intersections.

But the fact remains that on an average day in Boston, two or three pedestrians or bicyclists are hit and injured by cars.

And the mayor is now facing mounting pressure from safe streets advocates, ordinary residents fed up with dangerous streets running through their neighborhoods, and the City Council to do more, much more, about Boston's menacing streets.

On Tuesday, in a Council hearing on the city's transportation budget, Walsh administration officials got an earful from all three pressure points.

Stacy Thompson, executive director of the LivableStreets Alliance, was unusually blunt in her critique of the city's non-progress on safe streets projects.

"We have community members who just want a crosswalk painted," Thompson said. "We have sent lists of very simple signals, crosswalks ... and nothing has happened."

"I'm quite certain that folks in that community will be upset to hear we're going to start a process to hire a person to begin a process in the Fall to begin talking about solutions."

Becca Wolfson, executive director of the Boston Cyclists Union, said the limited initiatives the city is pursuing fail to address the most persistently

dangerous arterial roadways the city itself has identified as “high crash” corridors.

“It’s time to shift from dealing with those small neighborhood streets that don’t carry the same volume as our arterials and shift that to the major roads that carry more people, that have higher volume, higher speeds and where the majority of fatalities and injuries are occurring,” Wolfson said.

Brendan Kearney, spokesperson for the pedestrian advocacy group Walk Boston, echoed that point: “We know where the problems are,” said Kearney. “We now need to make changes to the streets.”

Council members, meanwhile, attested to the enormous volume of calls they get from residents concerned about dangerous streets and intersections in their neighborhoods - an issue Councilor Michael Flaherty recently called the “single greatest issue” facing the city’s residents.

“No one likes to receive these complaints over and over again over the course of years and not have an adequate response, it’s really unsettling,” said Council President Andrea Campbell. “At the top of our list, even higher sometimes than our housing constituent cases ... are traffic and speeding concerns.”

“You have folks literally standing on their streets thinking about how they’re going to install their own speed humps,” said Campbell.

Campbell and other Council members also reiterated their frustration with the city’s flagship safe streets initiative, the “Neighborhood Slow Streets” program, which has residents submit applications for local safety interventions.

The city has received over one hundred such applications - last year, the city selected just five for safety improvements.

“We’re telling folks trust your government, your government is there for you,” said Campbell, “and then nothing happens.”

Councilor Michelle Wu, who chairs the Council's Transportation Committee, and who has previously criticized the Slow Streets program for requiring residents to compete for safety interventions rather than using data to proactively tackle problem corridors, sought answers to residents' most basic questions.

"What is the likelihood of a street signing petition getting a stop sign or speed bumps?" Wu asked Boston Streets chief Chris Osgood.

Osgood's reply was indirect: "We want to find the right way as we do routine re-surfacing as we rebuild sidewalks that we are taking the time to add speed bumps, or build out sidewalks to make streets safer," he said.

"So just keep going and bringing them to your attention," Wu interjected, sounding, like many of her colleagues, less than satisfied with the answer.