

CommonWealth



TRANSPORTATION

Slowing down the 'stroads' of Boston

Success could be key in reducing roadway fatalities

[BRUCE MOHL](#) // May 13, 2019

BOSTON'S VERSION OF VISION ZERO, an idea that originated in Sweden more than two decades ago, sets as its target zero fatalities or serious injuries by 2030 among people who walk, bicycle, or drive.

A recent [policy report](#) from the Vision Zero Coalition indicates the number of fatalities has been declining in Boston, falling from 21 in 2016 to 10 in 2018, with the number of pedestrian fatalities dropping from 14 to 7 over that time period. But the number of crashes that required response by emergency medical service teams actually increased slightly, rising from 4,355 in 2016 to 4,367 in 2018.

“Generally speaking the trend lines are better, or at least they’re not any worse, than when the program was adopted,” said Matthew Lawlor, who is active in [WalkUP Roslindale](#). “We’re making progress, but those of us who are advocates think progress isn’t coming fast enough.”

Lawlor, who joined neighborhood transportation advocate Vivian Ortiz and host Josh Fairchild of TransitMatters on the Codcast, says the key to lowering the number of fatalities is slowing traffic down.

Boston has lowered its speed limit to 25 miles per hour, and [is now pursuing](#) another drop to 20 miles per hour. But Lawlor says more can be done, particularly with “[stroads](#),” a term used to characterize a multi-laned thoroughfare that is a cross between a road and a street. A road is designed for vehicles to get from point A to point B quickly (think highway), with relatively few entrance and exit points. A street is full of entrance and exit points; it’s more about slowly browsing, looking for a store, a business, or a home. When the two are combined, the result is a [stroad](#) that makes drivers think they are on a road, capable of higher speeds, when they are actually on a street sharing space with pedestrians and bicyclists.

Lawlor said stroads can be found on stretches of Tremont, Charles, and Beacon Streets in Boston. Fairchild said the design of stroads — straight

thoroughfares with multiple lanes — make people think they can go faster. “The cues of the environment don’t ask me to slow down,” Fairchild said. Part of the solution, according to Lawlor, is better roadway design. He also said enforcement of speed limits is crucial. Lawlor said he is amazed that Boston doesn’t have camera-based school zone enforcement, while Ortiz said many school zones in the city lack speed limit signs.

Ortiz said residents of her neighborhood in Mattapan don’t want restrictions on driving. “I live in a neighborhood where folks are very proud of having their cars,” she said, noting most of the residents have given up on the T and mount a lot of resistance to sharing the road with bicycles.

“I don’t have a lot of cheerleaders in my camp when it comes to my neighbors because they’ve transitioned to completely being folks that are in cars. I find myself being alone in that community, and it’s difficult.”

Ortiz said a lot of transportation education is needed in many of Boston’s neighborhoods, but she said the current approach of the MBTA and other agencies is often counterproductive. Information provided at public meetings is not in multiple languages. The meetings are held at inconvenient times and at inaccessible locations.

“We can fill a room, but are we filling the room with the people that need to be asked and the ones that are actually using the system?” she asked.

Ortiz also said there is strong resistance to bike lanes and public transit, which tend to be associated with restrictions on driving or gentrification.

“There’s a sense of distrust that happens quite often,” she said.

“They see that bike lanes mean gentrification,” she said. “They don’t see it as something — maybe my grandchild will be able to ride safely, maybe I might feel more comfortable walking on the sidewalk.”