

# We can all do more to prevent roadway tragedies



[Guest Column](#)

December 20, 2022 12:07 am



An urban roadway in Arlington County, Virginia. (Michael Farrell / COG)

**By Pamela Sebesky**

It's a sobering fact: 360 lives were lost in crashes on our roads across metropolitan Washington, including Northern Virginia, in [2021](#). This represents a 12% increase in fatalities from the year prior, and the second year in a row that fatalities have risen. Serious injuries also rose, breaking a years-long downward trend.

This is both a regional and national issue. In May 2022, the Governors Highway Safety Association reported a 40-year high in pedestrian fatalities. As a region, area leaders have unified to implement strategies to reduce this worrying trend.

The [Transportation Planning Board](#) (TPB), the region's metropolitan planning organization, convenes local, state, regional and federal partners to coordinate plans, analyze data and build consensus among decision-makers to develop regional transportation plans and advance transportation safety, equity and more.

At our December 21 meeting, the TPB will vote to update federally mandated, data-driven regional roadway safety targets for fatalities and serious injury crashes. While this is an important measure to track our progress toward safe streets, our region cannot develop the people-first transportation system that is needed to reduce tragic, avoidable deaths and serious injury on our roadways with these targets alone.

It's difficult to set targets that accept any instance of death or serious injury on our roadways, because we know we can do better. Our region's leaders have committed to a future where pedestrians, cyclists and motorists coexist safely within our transportation networks. Achieving this vision is crucial to accomplishing

our overarching goal: a safe, sustainable, and thriving region for all our residents. True equity among the multimodal users of our transportation system cannot be obtained unless all users know they are protected while using our network.

We know that roads have not always been built to protect all users, but to move vehicles and the people within them efficiently. Driver behavior is a major contributor to [roadway fatalities and serious injury crashes](#). Safety features in our vehicles have made the occupants of the vehicles safer and have reduced the chances of crashes, but behaviors like speeding and distracted driving have put the safety of non-motorists on the roads at greater risk. This continued crisis makes clear that an overhaul of how we view, develop and use our transportation infrastructure is desperately needed.

This is no easy task and will require an “all hands on deck” approach. We know our state transportation departments join us in this mission. As public servants, protecting the livelihood of our residents is our number one priority.



This continued crisis makes clear that an overhaul of how we view, develop and use our transportation infrastructure is desperately needed.

Our region has adopted several tools to help us in this monumental effort toward a zero deaths goal. These include the TPB’s Street Smart public safety campaign and the Regional Roadway Safety Program, which provides funding to jumpstart local safety planning.

The federal government’s endorsement of the Safe Systems Approach (SSA) is also promising, elevating the people-focused transportation models found in Sweden, the Netherlands and New Zealand, for example. These early adopters of SSA experienced at least a 50% decrease in fatalities between the mid-1990s and 2015. This proves that our roadway safety aspirations are achievable.

These efforts work in unison to provide multiple layers of protection to keep people safe. But the data doesn’t lie; we need to do more to establish safe roads for all, including a focus on safe speeds. People make mistakes, which is why it’s critical to design and operate our transportation network to accommodate those mistakes and avoid death and serious injuries.

All of us have a role to play. Transportation agencies must work together to implement sweeping changes in how we design and evaluate our roadways, while integrating pedestrian and cycling facilities. Motorists need to be informed of, and constantly aware of, the risk posed to non-motorists on our roadways. Everyone must commit to the complete safety of all users.

Safe streets make vibrant communities. I’m proud to know our regional partners continue to push for innovative, groundbreaking measures to transform our roadways to better serve and protect our residents, and my colleagues and I on the TPB will do all we can to support them.

We must always strive to do better. With each of us doubling down on our efforts, we can reach our aspirations of a safe, people-centric system.

*Pamela Sebesky is chair of the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board and vice mayor of the City of Manassas.*

Republish

Our stories may be republished online or in print under Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. We ask that you edit only for style or to shorten, provide proper attribution and link to our web site. Please see our republishing guidelines for use of photos and graphics.