With ‘Vision Zero,’ District seeks traffic safety overhaul

By BRADY HOLT
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Last year, 26 people died in D.C. traffic crashes. By 2024, a multi-agency effort by the District government is striving to bring that figure down to zero.

Mayor Muriel Bowser joined a number of city leaders nationwide in signing a “Vision Zero” pledge soon after taking office last year, and the District unveiled its framework for working toward that goal in December. The D.C. Department of Transportation, the Metropolitan Police Department and other agencies are now working to implement 68 specific strategies designed to improve safety on the District’s roadways and sidewalks, with a goal of no deaths or even serious injuries.

“The idea is that all traffic fatalities are preventable on some form or another, and that comes through education, enforcement, engineering and evaluation of the safety data that’s out there,” said Sam Zimbabwe, associate director of the Transportation Department, in an interview. “There’s sort of a historic mentality that a certain loss of life is inevitable, and that’s what we’re trying to flip on its head.”

The 102-page Vision Zero action plan breaks its strategies into four categories: Creating safe streets, protecting vulnerable users, preventing dangerous driving and being transparent and responsive. Each item has a specific targeted completion date, with a number of goals already reached four months into the plan’s implementation.

Recommendations include:
- identifying at least 10 intersections per year in need of urgent safety improvements and working with local advisory neighborhood commissions to implement them quickly, starting in October 2016;
- filling in at least 40 blocks that lack sidewalks by October 2017;
- increasing the use of automated photo enforcement, with cameras stationed at all designated “high-priority” locations by October 2017;
- testing lower speed limits — 25 mph on two arterial streets, 20 mph with traffic calming in two residential neighborhoods, and 15 mph in areas with many children or elderly pedestrians — with accompanying speed cameras, by January 2017;
- installing or upgrading 20 miles of bicycle lanes, including five miles of protected lanes, in areas in the most need of safety enhancements by December.

Wisconsin Avenue now has a signal at Veezey Street where a pedestrian was killed last year.

2017:
- increasing enforcement against taxi drivers who endanger bicyclists, by October 2017;
- mandating side guards, which prevent pedestrians or cyclists from falling under a truck’s rear wheels, on all large trucks and buses registered in the District (including Metrosbuses and other vehicles) by October 2019;
- evaluating five roadway improvement projects before and after to understand their safety impacts, by October 2016; and
- upgrading at least 10 hazardous bus stops per year, starting in October 2017.

The full report is available at tinyurl.com/devisionzero, with the list of recommendations available in Appendix C.

“No one of the actions is entirely new,” Zimbabwe said. “There’s a lot of things the District has already been doing for a while and have led to the good safety record the District has on the whole. I think the action plan is the approach that’s going to move the ball farther forward in getting to zero.”

Another big component of Vision Zero is data. The action plan emphasizes greater collection of information on traffic crashes and other statistics, and using that to make informed decisions about where to prioritize investments. So while the District is already例行 routines and improvements to its intersections, to name one example, Vision Zero ensures that the Transportation Department focuses first on high-risk intersections and emphasizes safety upgrades during redesigns, Zimbabwe said.

Vision Zero has generally won support from major stakeholders, according to representatives of the American Automobile Association, the Washington Area Bicycle Association and the National Association of Counties. The D.C. Ward 3 D.C. Council member Mary Cheh, who chairs the

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council’s transportation committee, is especially enthusiastic about the promise held by improved data collection.

“I really feel that we’re somewhat in the dark about what’s happening,” Cheh said. “When we get a better handle on what’s occurring some of these deaths, we can formulate a better response.”

Greg Billing of the bicyclist association said he appreciates the specificity in the action plan.

“A great element of Vision Zero is that the goal is very clear and the timeline is set,” he said. “If in a year or two we look back and we haven’t made a dent in the issue, we still have the commitment and timeline to zero deaths.”

Some residents, however, aren’t convinced that Vision Zero will make it off the page. Tenleytown advisory neighborhood commissioner Jon Bender said the D.C. Department of Transportation has a poor record of following through.

“We’ve seen a lot of studies and we generally agree that the recommendations could make the greater Tenleytown area safer, but almost nothing is done,” Bender told an agency representative at his commission’s March 10 meeting. “You’ve got mounds of recommendations and a lot of little ant hills of action.”

Zimbabwe acknowledged that many study recommendations are ultimately not carried out, but he said residents would be wrong to assume that the agency simply forgot about them. In many cases, he said, further engineering analysis suggested that those approaches would be ineffective or counterproductive. However, he encouraged residents to nudge the agency if it falls behind.

At the March 10 meeting, Bender also raised concerns about the Metropolitan Police Department’s handling of crashes involving pedestrians, based on his experience after his teenage daughter was struck and injured by a car in a marked crosswalk at 41st and Chesapeake streets NW in January. He said police showed a lack of interest in the situation and too much deference to the driver who said she never saw his daughter before the impact.

“[The general assertion by a police officer that on a clear night under a streetlight a child could be ‘not visible’ because she was wearing dark clothing should concern all pedestrians and parents,” Bender wrote in an email. “He also contended that police didn’t thoroughly look for evidence of speeding or distracted driving or take photos of the scene, and that the police report omitted details that could have helped officials learn from the case.”

A Metropolitan Police Department spokesperson said the agency was unavailable for comment.

Another element of contention has emerged from the Vision Zero Enforcement Act of 2015, a bill proposed by the Bowser administration that included new and higher fines for traffic infractions, including $1,000 for exceeding the speed limit by more than 25 mph. In response to criticism, Bowser later backed away from some of the proposed fines.

“We haven’t seen any empirical evidence that links the amount of these fines with behavior modification,” said John Townsend, spokesperson for AAA Mid-Atlantic, who said he supports most of Vision Zero.

Cheh --- whose committee is currently marking up transportation safety legislation that she hopes to pass before the council’s July recess --- added that high fines can also unduly affect low-income drivers.

Zimbabwe said the Transportation Department accepts that some Vision Zero elements will face pushback as the public learns more about their specific details.

“There’s often a lot of concern, and often very valid concerns, about decisions we make,” he said. “That community dialogue is a part of implementation. ... Vision Zero isn’t something we can impose upon the community.”

Zimbabwe added that the goal of zero deaths is attainable without the support of the individuals who use the District’s transportation network.

“There’s some amount of human error and human decision-making that’s out there, so achieving that is not wholly up to DDOT,” he said. “It’s going to be up to everyone who’s getting around the city.”

To that end, the agency is asking residents to commit to a four-point safety pledge, to “know and abide by all the rules of the road as they apply to walking, biking, and driving; refrain from aggressive driving, distracted driving, and impaired driving; protect the most vulnerable travelers by being alert for people walking, wheelchairing, and biking; and prioritize the safety of myself and others above all else.”

Can the District actually attain the Vision Zero goal of no serious injuries or fatalities?

Zimbabwe finds an alternative question more helpful: “Is the vision the best vision to have, and how do we work proactively to achieve it?”

He and other stakeholders expressed confidence in the framework. Townsend of AAA Mid-Atlantic noted that the idea of near-universal seat-belt usage was also once dismissed as unrealistic — yet the District’s rate now stands at 93 percent. Now, it’s time for the next step, he said.

“It takes a concerted, multi-year, multi-prong approach to change the paradigm and change the culture to say those deaths are totally unacceptable,” said Townsend.