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Vision Zero: Municipalities take steps to reduce pedestrian deaths

Pedestrian collisions occur in Chapel Hill, Raleigh and Durham at rates higher than the state average, despite all three of those local governments having dedicated traffic safety programs committed to curbing preventable accidents.

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By **Lucas Thomae**, UNC Media Hub

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One November evening in Chapel Hill, Sinclair Larson's life changed forever when she was struck by a car on a Franklin Street crosswalk while walking her dog Jasper.

Larson and her dog were lucky enough to survive, although she doesn't remember the collision. She doesn't even recall leaving to go on the walk – the result of a significant brain injury. However, a comment the nurses made to Larson after she woke up at UNC Medical Center still sticks with her today, three years after she was hit.

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“The nurses were like, ‘Oh, yeah we get people that were hit on crosswalks all the time here,’” Larson said. “And I was like, ‘All the time?’ Like, that’s a problem.”

Larson – who was struck at the flashing pedestrian crosswalk near Davie Circle – was the third pedestrian in Chapel Hill to be struck by a vehicle that week, according to data on pedestrian-automobile collisions kept by the North Carolina Department of Transportation. There were 17 such collisions in 2020, and that number increased to 29 in 2021, 27 in 2022 and 33 in 2023.

The rate of pedestrian deaths is increasing nationwide, and NCDOT data shows that North Carolina is no exception to that trend. The issue is particularly apparent in the Research Triangle. Pedestrian collisions occur in Chapel Hill, Raleigh and Durham at rates higher than the state average, despite all three of those local governments having dedicated traffic

safety programs committed to curbing preventable accidents. Achieving the goal of zero traffic fatalities has proven to be a challenge in the face of limited funds and the Triangle's booming population.

Why are pedestrian deaths increasing?

Automobile-pedestrian collisions in North Carolina increased from 1,932 in 2007 compared to 2,229 in 2022, although much of that increase can be explained by the state's population growth. In fact, the rate of pedestrian crashes per 100,000 residents in 2007 was higher than it was in 2022.

What's baffling community leaders and researchers alike is a more alarming trend – the rate of pedestrian deaths has been steadily increasing for at least the past decade in North Carolina and across the U.S.

Some experts have suggested that drivers are more distracted than ever by smartphones and touch screen displays in cars, although researcher Stephen Heiny said there isn't great data to corroborate that explanation.

Heiny is a research associate at the UNC Highway Safety Research Center, which is headquartered on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard right in the middle of Chapel Hill. His work focuses primarily on pedestrian safety.

“These fatalities are largely occurring on really one type of roadway,” Heiny said. “These are wider, multi-lane roads, and most of them are in more built up areas, so urban-suburban areas with a lot of commercial residential development around them.”

That description fits many of the major roads in the Research Triangle that are seeing more and more traffic each year as people are lured to the area by a lucrative job market.

Chapel Hill, Durham and Raleigh all experience pedestrian collisions at a higher rate than the state average. While there’s no discernable trend regarding pedestrian deaths in Chapel Hill and Durham, fatalities are rapidly increasing in the state capital. There were 23 pedestrian deaths in Raleigh in 2022, a 64 percent increase compared to the previous high of 14 deaths in 2019.

Local governments work toward zero traffic fatalities

Chapel Hill is a Vision Zero community, meaning that the town decided to join a global network of municipalities across Europe and the U.S. committed to eliminating traffic deaths and serious injuries. The basic philosophy of the Vision Zero Network is that traffic deaths are a systemic problem, not a behavioral one, and that road infrastructure and related policies should be designed to expect human error and lessen the severity of crashes.

The Chapel Hill Town Council pledged to eliminate traffic deaths and serious injuries within a decade in its 2021 Vision Zero Resolution, which evolved from an earlier version of a traffic safety program that the town adopted in 2018. Chapel Hill is one of 18 communities in North Carolina, including Raleigh and Durham, that have begun implementing Vision Zero strategies.

Bergen Watterson, the mobility and greenways manager of the Chapel Hill's Planning Division, leads the Town's Vision Zero efforts. She said that one of the main goals of the program is creating more traffic calming measures.

"If you're driving 25 miles an hour, you have a way less likely chance of killing somebody than you do if you're even driving 35," she said.

Watterson and Heiny both emphasized that multi-lane roads with wide lanes are particularly problematic because they can make drivers feel more comfortable driving at high speeds. Watterson said that Chapel Hill has taken several steps over the past several years to slow cars down on heavily trafficked roads.

Some of those efforts include changing the speed limits on all locally-owned roads to 25 miles per hour, installing rectangular rapid flashing beacons – commonly known as RRFBs – at mid-block crosswalks on MLK Boulevard and Franklin Street, and erecting bollards between lanes in sections of MLK Boulevard.

Sean Driskill is the program manager for Raleigh's Vision Zero Program, which was adopted in 2022. He said his team is looking into similar "low-cost, high-impact" solutions to lessen the severity of pedestrian-automobile collisions.

"We're still averaging 30 to 40 percent of our fatalities a year, unfortunately, being pedestrians," Driskill said. "So for my group, that's why there's an approach to target those individuals around schools, around downtown areas, just overall around locations where we know there's high [pedestrian] traffic."

Driskill said that the city improved the signage around school zones and is also looking into installing raised crosswalks in its efforts to slow drivers down.

The City of Durham, which became one of the first North Carolina communities to pass a Vision Zero resolution in 2017, hired Lauren Grove to be its first dedicated Vision Zero coordinator in December.

Grove came from Houston, where she coordinated Vision Zero in the U.S.'s fourth largest city. She said Durham has implemented many pedestrian-safety measures over the past several years and that the next step was to have someone dedicated full-time to the city's Vision Zero efforts who could draft an action plan.

"You can have a resolution and say you commit to ending traffic deaths, but you really need to put resources behind that," Grove said.



Sinclair Larson still lives in Chapel Hill with Jasper, her Australian shepherd. Photo courtesy of Larson.

A long road ahead

Representatives of Chapel Hill and Raleigh said they were optimistic about their respective pedestrian safety efforts, although both of their Vision Zero programs are in the early stages of implementation.

Right now, it's too early to tell from the data whether the initiatives are creating positive change. Both Heiny and Driskill said continued funding and buy in from their local and state governments will be necessary to see their goals through.

Chapel Hill allocates \$50,000 of its yearly budget to Vision Zero and an additional \$75,000 for bicycle and pedestrian safety. In its most recent budget, Raleigh set aside \$3.2 million for maintenance, traffic signals and Vision Zero.

Still, that's just enough money for smaller projects and necessary maintenance. The programs rely on grants from the Department of Transportation and the Governors Highway Safety Association for more ambitious undertakings.

At least for right now, the progress on Vision Zero initiatives across the Triangle have been slow moving – so slow moving that many residents likely don't know that Vision Zero exists. Some say that they haven't noticed much change in terms of pedestrian safety at all.

"I don't know that we've gotten a ton of community feedback on Vision Zero. In fact, I probably say that the majority of the community doesn't know what it is. We are working to change that," Watterson said.

Larson, who hadn't heard of Chapel Hill's Vision Zero program, still walks her beloved Australian shepherd daily. The collision that nearly took her life occurred on an RRFB – proof that even the pedestrian-friendly infrastructures that some municipalities are choosing to build aren't perfect. Larson said she'd prefer stop lights at some of the midblock crossings with RRFBs.

"I don't know if necessarily I would say that I see the infrastructure being set up for the pedestrian safety but hopefully that's something [Town leaders] work on in the future," she said.

Lucas Thomae is a senior from Greensboro, N.C. majoring in media and journalism with a minor in data science. He's written for NC Health News, The Daily Tar Heel and The Greensboro News & Record. After graduation he hopes to work in local news.

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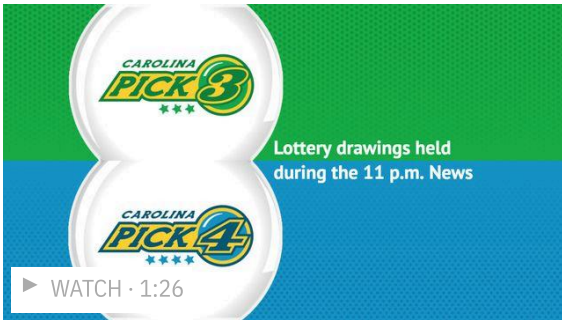
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