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Vision Zero, a 'Road Diet' Fad, Is Proving to Be Deadly

Emergency vehicles get stuck on streets that have been narrowed to promote walking and bicycling.

By Christopher D. LeGras

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Auto traffic flows in and out of Los Angeles.

PHOTO: FREDERIC J. BROWN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Renee Khoury was in the kitchen when she heard a scream. She ran outside and found her 65-year-old mother, Rebecca, sprawled on the sidewalk with a compound fracture in her left leg. Renee called 911 then comforted her mom as best she could.

The Khourys live five blocks from Fire Station 62 in West Los Angeles's Mar Vista neighborhood. They heard a siren right away, but something was wrong. It wasn't moving. "It took 10 minutes," says Renee's husband, Jeff. "Becky was in pain. They could hear help but it couldn't reach them."

Los Angeles, like cities nationwide, is transforming its streets. In July 2017 the city installed a "road diet" on a 0.8-mile stretch of Venice Boulevard in Mar Vista, reducing four lanes to two and adding bike lanes separated from traffic by parking buffers. The project is part of Mayor Eric Garcetti's Vision Zero initiative, which aims to eliminate traffic fatalities in the city by 2025. Launched in 2015, Vision Zero is the most radical transformation of how people move through Los Angeles since the dawn of the freeway era 75 years ago.

By almost any metric it's been a disaster. Pedestrian deaths have nearly doubled, from 74 in 2015 to 135 in 2017, the last year for which data are available. After years of improvement, Los Angeles again has the world's worst traffic, according to the transportation research firm Inrix. Miles of vehicles idling in gridlock have reduced air quality to 1980s levels.

The international Vision Zero movement began in the 1990s in Sweden, where it apparently worked well. The Swedish government claims a 50% reduction in traffic deaths since 2000. Hoping to achieve similar gains, U.S. mayors from New York City to North Pole, Alaska, have adopted Vision Zero. Projects range from multibillion-dollar light-rail lines to retiming traffic lights for slower traffic. Road diets are key.

In neighborhoods across New York City, residents, community boards and local businesses have done battle with city officials over "traffic calming" measures imposed by city hall. Lane reductions, bike lanes, new medians and other innovations designed to reduce vehicle speeds make it difficult for bulky ambulances and fire trucks to respond quickly to emergencies. And while pedestrian deaths have plummeted in the Big Apple under Vision Zero, deaths of bicyclists, motorcyclists and people in vehicles have ticked up.

Around the country, officials have implemented projects on short notice, over local objections and without consulting first responders. Howard Holt, a fire captain in Oakland, Calif., said he found out about a road diet in front of his station when he arrived for a shift one morning. "I wasn't sure if I was supposed to drive in the new green lanes," he said recently. "Turns out they're bike lanes." He calls the city bureaucracy "The Wall."

During the 2017 La Tuna Fire, the biggest in Los Angeles in half a century, a road diet on Foothill Boulevard in the Sunland-Tujunga neighborhood bottlenecked evacuations. After the fire a neighborhood association voted to go off the road diet. The city ignored the request and instead added another one to La Tuna Canyon Road.

The story isn't confined to big cities. In Waverly, Iowa (pop. 9,837), Fire Chief Dennis Happel and Bremer County Sheriff Dan Pickett say the city has ignored their concerns over a road diet plan. In Fairbanks, Alaska, Fire Battalion Chief Brian Davis says the city installed traffic controls to mitigate the impact of new bike lanes in front of his fire house. In January the average high temperature in Fairbanks is zero Fahrenheit—much too cold to ride a bike.

It's noble to want to make America's streets as safe as they can be. But government officials shouldn't impose projects on communities that don't work, inconvenience residents, hurt businesses and impede emergency responders in the process.

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