

# City mobilizes on pedestrian safety

■ **Study:** Agency vets plan to reduce growing fatality rate

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Following a record number of pedestrian fatalities last year, the District is now in the forefront of engineering and enforcement efforts to protect pedestrians, according to police and transportation officials at

a community meeting Saturday.

But officials acknowledged — and several residents agreed — that the city still has a long way to go to address the congestion, rampant speeding, distracted driving and disregard that continue to make urban streets hazardous.

The meeting, hosted by Ward 3 Council member Mary Cheh, came after a spike in pedestrian deaths raised concerns. It also gave Department of Transportation offi-

cials a chance to air a new draft “pedestrian master plan” that recommends engineering changes and eliminating some crosswalks at intersections along Wisconsin Avenue and seven other major traffic corridors throughout the city.

The crowded meeting at 2nd District police headquarters produced several statistics:

- There were 54 traffic fatalities in the District last year, with 25 of the See **Pedestrian**/Page 6

## PEDESTRIAN

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victims pedestrians. The “small uptick” from previous years looms large because overall numbers are so low, said Emeka Moneme, director of the District Department of Transportation.

- Nationwide, pedestrians make up about 10 percent of traffic fatalities, but the fact that nearly half here were pedestrians is “typical in urban areas,” said Elizabeth Alicandri, director of safety programs at the Federal Highway Administration.
- Of the pedestrian fatalities, half were caused by “pedestrian error” — jaywalking or crossing against the light, for example — said Assistant Police Chief Patrick Burke, who oversees traffic safety and enforcement.
- Police issued 166 tickets for crosswalk violations in the 2nd District alone since September.

A lineup of police officers summarized their efforts to protect 2nd District residents from speeding cars. District law now states that a car must stop at an unsignalized

crosswalk until the pedestrian has reached the other side of the street.

“I wrote two tickets yesterday, 3400 block of Wisconsin,” said Officer Dave Baker. “A young lady left Starbucks, a car stopped, then kept going after she passed him.” Baker said he reminded the driver he would be at fault if she turned back for any reason.

Eric Gaul, a reserve officer and former candidate for city council, said he had “personally written a couple thousand dollars in speeding tickets” on MacArthur Boulevard. Gaul said crosswalk violations are difficult to enforce because an officer must witness the violation although his instinct would be to stop the car before it runs into a pedestrian. He laughed as he referred to a common excuse from drivers: “I would have stopped, but I was going too fast.”

Burke had his own ticketing tale, too. “I stopped a woman from Maryland [for a crosswalk violation] today on MacArthur Boulevard, with her 9-year-old daughter in the car.” When told she had to stop at the crosswalk, the driver said, “You’re kidding. I didn’t

know that.”

The police officers outlined city-wide efforts to protect pedestrians, among them targeted enforcement drives against speeding — the main culprit in pedestrian deaths, Burke said — distracted driving and drunk driving.

But violations are “so widespread that traditional enforcement is not enough,” said Burke. “We could take every officer, put them at every crosswalk, and that would not be enough.” He argued for increased fines and more photo enforcement.

Launched in 2001, the District’s photo speed-enforcement program has become “the largest on the continent,” said Burke, with 10 fixed cameras and 12 mobile devices. Police intend to increase the numbers this year and are also considering using red-light cameras to “capture” cars speeding through intersections on green.

Colleen Mitchell, a consultant at Toole Design Group who is helping draft the Transportation Department’s pedestrian plan, outlined the “tool kit” of changes it recommends. They include pedestrian-activated signals, better lighting and

raised crosswalks at some intersections; 100 new right-turn-on-red restrictions; and removing markings at 40 unsignalized crosswalks.

A major finding is that unsignalized crosswalks without other safety features are hazardous. "Many studies show they have higher rates of pedestrian crashes," Mitchell said. She said federal standards will soon require either removing some unsignalized crosswalks or adding safety features, such as pedestrian push buttons and lighting. The District's new plan echoes that general guideline.

The draft plan also recommends constructing or extending 75 median strips to provide "pedestrian refuges" and relocating some bus stops to the far side of intersections to reduce the risk of pedestrians being struck by passing motorists while crossing in front of buses.

The draft study, which is being updated frequently, can be viewed at [tooledesign.com/projects/dc/](http://tooledesign.com/projects/dc/).

Other safety-improvement plans include painting advance stop lines 20 to 30 feet back from unsignalized crosswalks to allow unobstructed sight lines for pedestrians and drivers. Moneme said the idea has worked well in other cities. "It's one we should definitely try," said the transportation director.

Moneme said he also intends to "bring back the old Barnes dance" — a phase in the red-green light cycle for pedestrians only, named after a traffic engineer — "so there is no pedestrian-vehicle conflict." He said the idea has been implemented at a few intersections downtown and that the Transportation Department hopes to add more, possibly near schools.

Several speakers praised a bill introduced by Cheh late last year that would increase the fine from \$50 to \$500 for failing to stop for a pedestrian in a crosswalk. The lower figure, one speaker noted, is the same as the fine for running over a fire hose. The bill would also require signs at major entry points to the city, stating: "In DC, Failure to Stop for Pedestrian in Crosswalk,

\$500 fine."

Or more bluntly, Eric Gilliland of the Washington Area Bicyclist Association suggested, "There should be a sign on every artery: 'We walk here, we bike here, please don't kill us.'"

Alicandri, the federal highway official, said federal standards may be revised to make pedestrian countdown signals required, not optional. Officials may also recalculate the time pedestrians need to cross a street and allow jurisdictions that receive federal funding for road work to set speed limits as low as 15 mph, when appropriate, rather than the current 25 mph minimum.

Others, including Cheh, suggested broader education efforts, including a special push to ensure that Metrobus drivers, cab drivers and police respect crosswalk laws. One man said Metrobuses should have a "How's my driving?" sign on the rear with a phone number to call.

Cheryl Cort, policy director for the Coalition for Smarter Growth, said roads must be engineered to reduce vehicle speed. "We can have all enforcement we want," Cort said, "but in the past, road design was all about moving cars." A major standard for intersections, termed "level of service," measures only how quickly cars get through the intersection, she noted.

Cort suggested adding raised medians on multilane roads and more signals with "leading pedestrian intervals," which give pedestrians a head start at crossing the intersection before cars get a green light. "We have to design a physical environment that guides people to do the right thing," she said.

One local resident expressed a concern that if engineering slows traffic on major arteries like Wisconsin Avenue, more cars would take shortcuts through residential streets. "I can keep my 4-year-old off Wisconsin," he said.

But Moneme had the last word. "The city needs to make a choice: Either get people in and out quickly, or choose safety. We'd rather have people slow down," he said.