

NEW JERSEY TRAFFIC

As pedestrian deaths spike in N.J., safety experts urge Murphy to try NYC program

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After a spike in pedestrian deaths in 2017, safety advocates want Gov. Phil Murphy to begin a statewide "Vision Zero" campaign, similar to one credited with reducing fatalities in New York City.

As overall traffic fatalities increased in 2017, advocates questioned how effective current safety programs are. New Jersey uses a different national program, Toward Zero

Deaths, which advocates contend isn't doing enough as Vision Zero could.

"We need an aggressive plan to tackle pedestrian fatalities. A 13 percent increase (in one year) is not acceptable," said Janna Chernetz, Tri-State Transportation Campaign New Jersey policy director. "This can be done sooner and put the state on a path to reducing fatalities."

Murphy could sign an executive order to establish a New Jersey "Vision Zero" campaign, similar to the program New York City implemented to reduce pedestrian and cyclist deaths, Chernetz said.

The Vision Zero recommendation was also included in a report from Murphy's transportation transition team, which administration officials said is being considered, along with other suggestions.

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio credited Vision Zero for a 32 percent drop in pedestrian fatalities to just 101 people in 2017, the lowest number since the city started keeping records.

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Under Vision Zero, New York City officials have built bike and pedestrian infrastructure and used specialized enforcement, including stiffer penalties for drivers involved in a collision with a pedestrian or cyclist that results in death or serious injury.

Nationally, 30 cities are involved in Vision Zero, but no entire states are part of the program, said Kathleen Ferrier, a Vision Zero spokeswoman.

Vision Zero commits to eliminating traffic deaths and serious injuries over a specific time period, she said. Setting a time goal creates more urgency to use many tactics to reach or to realistically work toward achieving the goal, Ferrier said. It also holds government accountable, she said.

The two programs use different strategies to reach the same goal, NJDOT officials contend.

"NJDOT has embraced Toward Zero Deaths, which was developed by transportation safety stakeholders, including the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration as an adaptation of Vision Zero," said Dan Tirana, an NJDOT spokesman. "Many of the

engineering strategies promoted by Vision Zero, such as roundabouts and road diets, are facets of NJDOT's implementation of Toward Zero Deaths."

Some pedestrian advocates said Vision Zero is a better alternative. Toward Zero Deaths has a goal to reduce deaths by 2.5 percent, which by 2030, is only a 30 percent drop in traffic fatalities, said Cyndi Steiner, New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition executive director.

"That is a far cry from NYC's goal of zero deaths by 2024 and Philadelphia's goal of zero deaths by 2030," she said. "New Jersey needs a Vision Zero policy because the state continues to rank at the top or near the top in the nation in the percentage of road deaths that occur to pedestrians and bike riders."

In 2016, New Jersey had the 15th highest pedestrian fatality rate in the nation, according to Governor's Highway Safety Association analysis.

Increasing traffic deaths over the past three years indicate existing state programs haven't been effective, Steiner said.

"Shooting for just a reduction in traffic deaths continues the current thinking that there is a certain number of traffic deaths that is an acceptable number," she said. "To us, the only acceptable number is zero."

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