

metroTALKS TORONTO'S DEADLY STREETS

Staying on course

With a revamped road-safety plan garnering unanimous support from city council last week, Toronto is at a turning point when it comes to life — and death — on our streets. Metro invited prominent pedestrian and cycling advocates to our office to discuss why the road-safety conversation is gaining traction and what's needed to ensure the talk translates into action.



DANIELLA LEVY-PINTO
Walk Toronto

Levy-Pinto, who is blind, has been nearly hit by drivers making right turns at intersections three times in four months. She feels less safe walking lately, saying drivers have become "more impatient."



GIL PENALOSA,
8-80 Cities

Penalosa was recently hit by the mirror of a passing truck while riding his bike. "What's the difference between injured or seriously injured? Often, it's just luck," he says.



PATRICK BROWN,
founder of Bike Law Canada

A decade ago, Brown represented the family of a man who was killed by a turning driver, who received a paltry \$85 fine. "In a situation where a human life was taken, it just seemed so wrong," the lawyer said.



NANCY SMITH LEA,
Toronto Centre for Active Transportation

Smith Lea became a cyclist after moving to Toronto and says her activism is motivated "by a love of cycling." She's been hit by cars four times while riding her bike; each time, she had the right of way.



ALBERT KOEHL
lawyer and co-founder of Bells on Bloor

When Koehl was a child, a friend was killed while doing his paper route. It happened on a 60 km/h road, but "no one asked about the speed." He's since become an advocate for lower speed limits in the city.

ALL PHOTOS: LIZ BEDDALL/METRO



Luke Simcoe
Metro | Toronto

In 2012, a suggestion by Toronto's medical health officer to lower speed limits was dismissed outright by city council. Four years later, a road-safety plan containing speed reductions across the city was passed unanimously by many of the same politicians who once scoffed at the idea.

"I was impressed by how little opposition there was," said environmental lawyer and Bells on Bloor co-founder Albert Koehl. "That's the result of people saying that death and injury on our roads is no longer acceptable."

Bike Law Canada founder Patrick Brown said Metro's recent

Toronto's Deadly Streets helped move the safety conversation forward.

Perceptions are changing, he said. "Even when I'm sitting at the dinner table now, people want to talk about pedestrians, cars and cyclists."

Here's what the advocates had to say about holding our politicians to account and making sure the conversation keeps moving in the right direction.

'We are all pedestrians'

Gil Penalosa, chair of 8-80 cities, was shocked by how few politicians in Toronto are willing to take up the cause of walking.

"One hundred per cent of voters are walking, so it seems an obvious choice for a politician to become the champion of pedestrians," he said.



These issues are not technical, they're not financial. They're political in the biggest sense of the term. Gil Penalosa

Accessibility is more than an 'afterthought'

The needs of people with disabilities aren't adequately addressed by the new road-safety plan, said Daniella Levy-Pinto, a representative from Walk Toronto who is blind.

"It's not even one of the five emphasis areas," she said.

Levy-Pinto urged people to pressure politicians to improve accessibility. In particular, she wants to see audible pedestrian signals at more intersections.

"If there's a light, there should be an audible signal," she said.

A 'systematic' approach

Rather than the piecemeal approach contained in the current plan, advocates called for things such as lower speed limits and right-turn restrictions to be implemented citywide — or at least in the downtown core.

"It's easier to implement as well as to enforce if it's general," Penalosa said.

Brown suggested making the entire downtown core a community safety zone, where fines for things such as distracted driving would be increased.

"It sends a message that this is an area that is frequented by

pedestrians and cyclists and therefore you're subject to different rules," he said.

Stop the blame game

Smith Lea was discouraged by how much of the road-safety plan is focused on education. Such campaigns, she said, lead to an unproductive discussion about who's to blame when a serious or fatal crash happens.

"The vision of Vision Zero is about shifting away from this orientation about who's at fault. It's irrelevant. We know there are going to be collisions and deaths so let's just figure out how to stop it," she said.

'Humanizing' the discussion

Penalosa and Koehl said they were buoyed by an increasing focus on victims as human beings, rather than statistics.

"We're humanizing the discussion," Penalosa said. "By saying the victim was a 73-year-old father of three, we make people stop and think, 'Hey, that could be my grandfather.'"

Benchmark better cities

During the road-safety debate, city staff pointed out that Toronto has a lower per capita road fatality rate than other major cities, including New York and Chicago.

But rather than compare itself to cities with worse track records, safety advocates urged Toronto to compete with itself.

"In Copenhagen, 41 out of 100 people move around by bicycle, but they're striving to get to 50," Penalosa said. "One symptom of being a great city is wanting to be better all the time."