

Madison, Wisconsin

Community Highlights

Community Description	Madison is the capital city of Wisconsin, located in the south-central part of the state. It has a population of approximately 269,000 residents. Madison has the highest number of parks and playgrounds per capita among the top 100 U.S. cities and is distinguished by its extensive network of bike trails. It is one of only five communities to earn a "Platinum Bicycle Friendly Community" rating ¹ from the League of American Bicyclists, highlighting its commitment to cycling infrastructure and culture.
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Vision Zero Adoption:	Vision Zero Target:
2020	2035

Challenges	Increase in fatalities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in low-income communities and communities of color; disparities in traffic enforcement citations.
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Safe System Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement speed management to realize safer speeds • Address top-risk locations and populations • Take an active role to affect change in vehicle design, features, and use • Accelerate research and adoption of technology; double down on what works • Implement new approaches to public education and awareness
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Funding	Local budget development is a collaborative, multi-step process that involves city agencies, the Finance Committee, and Common Council. In 2022, their "Forward to Vision Zero – Madison" submission was awarded supplemental planning grants and in 2023, their "Forward to Vision Zero – Madison, Safe System for Vulnerable Roadway Users" was awarded implementation grants through USDOT Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A).
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Lessons Learned

- Strong leadership from elected officials was critical for the implementation of the Safe System approach in Madison. The city committed to Vision Zero in 2020.
- The city has a multi-disciplinary, multi-department Vision Zero Steering Team, which includes 10 city departments, and 45 additional supporting stakeholders. The Vision Zero Steering Team ensures that stakeholders understand their role, do not get overwhelmed, and recommit to safety each day.
- With strong community engagement and a data-driven/equity-centered outreach, the community continues to embrace the Safe System approach and agrees that increasing safety is most important, even if travel is slightly slower or less convenient.
- Getting buy-ins from staff at all levels is important for the sustained success of Vision Zero. With collaborative leadership from key staff at the Vision Zero Steering Team, the city is institutionalizing the Vision Zero philosophy and the Safe System approach in the design and operations of transportation infrastructures.
- In the future, the city would like to expand its cooperation with Public Health Madison & Dane County for more comprehensive safety data collection and analysis. Further, the city will strengthen partnerships with the industry to benefit from technology innovation, such as proactive safety assessment through video analytics, smartphones, and connected vehicles to identify locations for potential improvements based on near-misses and speeding data.

Phase I: Getting Started

Leadership

- The Vision Zero initiative started in 2020 after Common Council members and the mayor, who are passionate about transportation safety, were elected. City leadership are strong advocates and supporters of the Safe System approach, with some of them having experienced personal tragedy from traffic fatalities.
 - “We must prioritize safety over speed. We must prioritize safety over shaving a few minutes off our commute. We’re talking about the deaths of someone’s mother or father, someone’s child, someone’s friend.” – Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway (from Madison Vision Zero action plan)²
- Other factors that motivated Vision Zero and Safe System approach implementation in Madison included the increased number of traffic fatalities due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the high anticipated population growth between 2010 and 2040 as the fastest growing region in the State of Wisconsin (which would result in more traffic conflicts on Madison’s roads).

Ready Implementors

- Madison reaffirmed the city’s commitment to Complete Streets in 2009³ and had a history of designing streets to accommodate all modes of travel. For example, the city’s first parking protected bike lane was built along South Bassett Street in 2019⁴.
- At the direction of the mayor and Council the Complete Green Streets Initiative had the following goals:
 - City of Madison’s Complete Green Streets Initiative was tasked to lead decision processes that were used to determine what actions should be taken in the construction and reconstruction of city streets.
 - Led by the City Department of Transportation, stakeholders initially involved in the Complete Green Streets Initiative included engineers, planners, policymakers, law enforcement, emergency response teams, public health professionals, and community leaders. The Initiative resulted in the development of a Complete Green Streets Guide⁵.
 - The Complete Streets Initiative was essential to address the controversial topic of allocation of street space in Madison. For example, extension of the original parking protected bike lane along South Bassett Street was proposed, along with the construction of a protected intersection at West Washington Avenue. The project would require removal of parking spaces to provide adequate sight distance of cyclists for automobiles. With public outreach, the Complete Green Streets Initiative team conveyed the message that spending a few more minutes looking for parking could make a difference between life and death for people biking. The project was ultimately approved and built in 2021.⁶

Action

- In 2020, the Madison Common Council adopted Madison’s Vision Zero goal and the Vision Zero staff team was tasked with developing a Vision Zero Action Plan, which incorporates a Safe System approach.
- Two years of collaboration between a Vision Zero Steering Team, a multi-disciplinary Stakeholder Task Force, and community members resulted in the final 2020-2035 Vision Zero Action Plan.

Phase II: Building Support

Starting Simply

- The city believes that it is necessary to move beyond traditional understandings of our transportation system, typically led by transportation planners and engineers, and expand the list to all of those with responsibility within Safe Systems.
- At the direction of the mayor's office, a Vision Zero Steering Team was created, and initially included the following city departments: Mayor's Office, Traffic Engineering, Transportation, Madison Police Department, Engineering, Fleet Services, Metro Transit, and Public Health Madison & Dane County, with Traffic Engineering leading the initiative.
 - Later, staff from the Finance Department and Neighborhood Resource Teams joined the Vision Zero Steering Team.
 - The list of additional city departments and government agencies, as well as other city committees and organizations partnering on Vision Zero is extensive⁷
- The city focuses on the following Safe System factors to achieve the goal of zero fatalities and severe injuries:
 - **Safe Streets:** Speed reduction, improvements on High-Injury Network Streets, pedestrian and bicyclist network connectivity, street lighting.
 - **Safe People:** Expand alternatives to driving, build a traffic safety culture, education and outreach.
 - **Safe Vehicles:** Promote vehicle safety technologies, provide defensive driving training.
 - **Safety Data:** Improve data collection, transparency, and communication; use data to inform equitable decision making.
 - **Safety Focused Enforcement:** Focus on times and locations with the greatest impact on serious injury crashes, limit pretextual stops, prioritize enforcement of speeding and DIU, implementing training for officers regarding traffic safety and implicit bias.

Understanding Others' Perspectives

- Some partners have bigger priorities at certain times. For example, the public health partners were focused on COVID-19 efforts during the pandemic. Vision Zero Madison understood their limitations during that time and focused on simple, practical messaging and objectives of how they could be involved during that time. This was important to retain these partners. Public health partners were part of the Vision Zero Steering Team and provided input to strategies in the action plan, such as committing to collaborating with the Traffic Engineering Department to improve safety data.

Engaging the Community

- "Accountability" is one of Madison Vision Zero's principles. The city has clear goals and objectives, and engages the community in outreach and collaboration to make Vision Zero a success.
- Crash data only tells part of the story. Engaging with the community is an opportunity to learn about residents' lived experience with transportation safety and the realities of mobility in and around Madison.
- Engagement cannot be meaningful without targeted engagement to historically underrepresented communities, particularly communities of color.
- During the development of the Vision Zero Action Plan, the city had an engagement project called "[Let's Talk Streets](#)," which integrated community voices in the design and function of city streets. "Let's Talk Streets" included community listening sessions to understand their likes, dislikes, and what they would change about the streets of Madison. Community surveys and small group workshops were then convened to ensure the community agreed with the initial thoughts resulting from the listening sessions. This phase also included focused engagement in collaboration with a grocery store. At the end of these community outreach efforts based on discussing Vision Zero and Safe System approach, most community members agreed that increasing safety is most important, even if travel is slightly slower or less convenient.
- After adoption of the Vision Zero Action Plan, the city continued to engage the community through various community events such as "[Parks Alive!](#)" Also, often times, when a location is identified for review due to safety concerns, the city conducts neighborhood meetings to gather community input about what is needed and ensures project decisions are rooted in shared community values.

- Other examples of community engagement activities in Madison include:
 - World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims: Press conference organized by the Mayor’s Office, Traffic Engineering, and the Transportation Department in partnership with community stakeholders to honor victims, raise awareness of the impact of traffic deaths in Madison, and garner support for traffic safety measures.
 - Be Bright at Night Campaign: Promotes cyclist safety by distributing lights and reflective materials through partnerships between the City of Madison Traffic Engineering, other agencies, and volunteers, including direct interactions on the street to install lights on bicycles.
 - You are Loved Campaign: Launched over Valentine’s Day to enhance traffic safety awareness and promote safe travel practices among pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers.
 - Yield to Pedestrian Campaign: Educates all crosswalk users, including bikers, pedestrians, and drivers, about their rights and responsibilities, emphasizing the importance of drivers yielding to pedestrians, particularly when turning.
 - Safe Routes to School—Walk/Bike Education and Encouragement: Collaboration with community partners to provide bicycle and pedestrian safety education to students and teachers, including specific curricula and activities such as the Walking School Bus, supporting an increase in interest post-pandemic.

Celebrating and Sharing Success

- The city shares successes due to safety improvements in their Vision Zero quarterly newsletter, citywide blog posts, and website news releases. In addition, they take advantage of exciting city and community events to talk about Vision Zero efforts. One example is the Vision Zero Holiday Tree.

Phase III: Institutionalizing the Safe System Approach

Building a Sustainable Approach

- The city is currently moving from adoption to institutionalization of the Safe System approach, so that progress does not become contingent on one administration. The main coalition, the Vision Zero Steering Team, includes 10 city departments: Mayor’s Office, Madison Department of Transportation, Traffic Engineering, Engineering, Fleet Services, Metro Transit, Public Health Madison & Dane County, Finance, Neighborhood Resource Teams, and Madison Police Department. The Traffic Engineering Division has been leading the efforts and was able to secure staff buy-ins and is institutionalizing the Vision Zero philosophy and the Safe System approach in its design and operations of the city’s transportation systems.
- The city coordinates safety efforts with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT). In the 2023-2023 Strategic Highway Safety Plan (SHSP),⁸ WisDOT adopted the Safe System approach and required each county in the state to have a community-level, multi-disciplinary traffic safety commission. The local traffic safety commission should include representatives from WisDOT, law enforcement, education, medical field, legal community, board supervisors, civic leaders, safety advocates, local news, a highway safety coordinator, and a highway commissioner. The traffic safety commission must meet at least quarterly and review crash data and other safety-related matters. Based on data and citizens’ input, the traffic safety commission makes recommendations to WisDOT.

Securing Resources

- The City of Madison has a capital budget and an operating budget.⁹ The operating budget funds daily operations, community-based organizations that deliver services on behalf of the city, and other costs such as supplies and equipment. The capital budget funds physical infrastructure including roads, bike lanes, building improvements, affordable housing developments, and other projects. Budget development is a collaborative, multi-step process that involves city agencies, the Finance Committee, and Common Council.
- In 2021, the City Traffic Engineering Division integrated other safety-related programs and formed and significantly grew the new Safe Streets Madison Program¹⁰ to implement traffic safety measures in a fair and equitable manner to eliminate traffic deaths and serious injuries on city streets. The city approved over 150 projects since the new program was implemented.
- The city had developed a comprehensive initial Vision Zero Action Plan and applied for supplemental planning grants when they saw the opportunity to fund projects through the USDOT Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) program. In 2022, their “Forward to Vision Zero – Madison” submission was awarded supplemental planning grants and in 2023, their “Forward to Vision Zero – Madison, Safe System for Vulnerable Roadway Users” was awarded implementation grants through SS4A.

Phase IV: Sustaining the Safe System Approach

Use an Evidence-Based Approach

- “Data-Focused” is one of Madison Vision Zero’s principles. Safety decisions in Madison are data-driven, which allow the city to identify trends and investigate issues that can be addressed systematically rather than limiting the scope of analysis to isolated incidents. Data is also used to prioritize allocation of safety resources. Most of the data is compiled and distributed by the Traffic Operations and Safety Laboratory based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which includes a database of police reports. A High-Injury Network was developed as a result of this collaboration with the university.

Prepare for the Long Haul, Commit to the Safe System Approach, and Overcome Resistance to Change

- Prior to the adoption of the action plan, there was a considerable amount of skepticism and resistance for Vision Zero in Madison.
- “Safety” is one of Madison Vision Zero’s principles. The 2020-2035 Vision Zero Action Plan acknowledges that implementing safety interventions might require removal of parking spaces, narrowing of travel lanes, or reduction of the number of travel lanes, which can impact parking availability and motor vehicle travel times. However, the plan acts as a value statement by redefining safety as the priority in the city’s transportation system.
- “Vision Zero’s prioritization of safety over the efficient movement of vehicles means that drivers may have to wait in traffic for longer periods of time to allow those walking to safely cross busy streets, or spend a few more minutes looking for parking because of an added bicycle lane. These small changes, however, may mean the difference between life and death for people walking, biking and driving.” (from Madison Vision Zero Action Plan)
- After adoption of Vision Zero, the city faced challenges with virtual engagement as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. They lost the ability to continue to build and sustain relationships. The city started receiving criticism since overall crashes were not decreasing. Crash fatalities and severe crash injuries spiked during the pandemic. It was not until a couple of years later that trends showed that the most severe crashes were decreasing.
- With strong community engagement and a data-driven outreach, the community continues to recommit and embrace the Safe System approach and agrees that increasing safety is most important, even if travel is slightly slower or less convenient.
- In addition, the Vision Zero Steering Team continues to develop practical messaging and objectives, and collaborates with stakeholders to understand their role, do not get overwhelmed, and recommit to safety each day.
- The city will continue to release comprehensive Vision Zero progress reports⁶ and Vision Zero annual updates¹¹ to ensure accountability for fully implementing the Vision Zero Action Plan.

Additional Information

- Advice for similar agencies wanting to incorporate the Safe System approach in SHSPs: When coordinating with various stakeholders, rather than focusing on the terminology of the Safe System approach (e.g., specific elements) focus on the commonsense things that will bring down the fatalities and serious injuries by using the principles of the Safe System approach. Agreeing to the principles and how to get there would likely result in successful stakeholder collaboration and development of a comprehensive SHSP.
- Additional resources for [Madison, Wisconsin](#)

References

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