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Institute of Transportation Engineers
1627 Eye Street, NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20006 USA
Telephone: +1 202-785-0060 | Fax: +1 202-785-0609
www.ite.org

A President's Journey

Three years ago I embarked on a journey that very few have the chance and honor to take—the road to ITE International President. The personal and professional growth gained through this leadership journey is indescribable and unforgettable. It has been a very successful year in the new initiatives that have begun as part of the “new” ITE. My messages have touched upon pushing boundaries related to so many topic discussions around the transportation industry related to seamless transportation systems, diversity in practice and people, designing for people, evolving our tools and measures, partnerships and collaboration, global initiatives, public health and transportation, and Vision Zero. This is just the beginning, and I am hopeful that many of these topics will transform into actions.

As I write my last message as International President, I am pleading with our members who plan, design, construct, maintain, and operate transportation systems to embrace Vision Zero. Historically, traffic safety has been presented as a three-legged stool, with our ability to save lives in traffic resting steadily on a platform of enforcement, engineering, and education. These three Es are just tactics; new safety tools will be developed while old ones will become obsolete. This is where we come into play; we must identify the safety tools and measures that haven't worked and quickly develop new tools and measures that do.

The number of fatalities and severe injuries is staggering. Numerically, the death toll in the United States is equivalent to multiple jetliners crashing each week. It's nearly three times the number of Americans killed annually in homicides by guns. Yet there is no corresponding sustained outrage at the persistence of needless and preventable deaths. Listen to the stories of pain and sorrow of the families left behind. There is so much that must be done as a collective obligation born by those responsible for transportation. Every road user places trust in both fellow road users and those who plan, design, construct, maintain, operate, enforce, and support transportation systems. As transportation professionals we must place safety at the center of street designs and the geometry of urban streets to slow drivers to the speed of life—designing self-enforcing streets. Many crashes could be eliminated simply by the drivers slowing down, paying attention, and staying sober. While it has been demonstrated that a pedestrian hit at 45 miles per hour (mph) has a survival rate of 10 percent and that rate increases to 90 percent at 20 mph, speed is still not clearly highlighted as a key contributor to this death toll. Speed kills, and we need to come to grips with this. If you are not talking about controlling speeds, you are not talking about Vision Zero.

Vision Zero requires a new way of thinking about safety. We have applauded recent efforts of cities successfully lowering city-wide speeds to those appropriate to the context of the community. Dropping speeds by even 5mph can make the difference in being able to retrofit multimodal facilities, improving existing pedestrian and bicycle facilities and crossings, and ensuring a safer environment. Even on higher speed (+50 mph) arterials, a 5 mph drop can make a huge difference in stopping and passing sight distances, median width, radius/curves, lateral clearances, clear zones, acceleration/deceleration lane needs, and lengths. Yet, we hear excuses of not being able to change speed limits and not wanting to file for design exceptions. Is saving even one life not worth having a discussion on dropping speeds? Tell that to those that have lost a family member.

So as my parting words to all our professionals: use your power to influence the right tools and measures to protect the life and safety of all our community residents that use our transportation systems. It's both a moral and ethical responsibility.

It's been an honor and immensely rewarding to go through this journey as your President. Success is a journey, not a destination, so I find myself saying this was a very successful journey.

Paula Flores (Benway)
ITE International President