

Senate Environment and Public Works Committee

Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee

Karina Ricks Testimony on Safer Streets

Honorable Chair and Members of the Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak with you this afternoon on the critical topic of roadway safety.

My name is Karina Ricks. I am currently a resident of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and before that a long time resident of Washington, DC after growing up in rural Michigan. In addition to being a mother, daughter, walker, biker and driver, I am also a former city transportation Director and federal DOT Associate Administrator.

I am *deeply* honored and humbled to speak before this subcommittee. I know that honor comes with the responsibility to speak truthfully and candidly. I want to share with you experiences common to so many cities and towns across our country as they strive to rapidly deliver improvements to keep their residents safe and put to full use the unprecedented resources of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

I have spent my career as a practitioner, advocate and user of safe street design, and, like nearly every American, I am also family, friend and neighbor to numerous individuals who have lost their lives traveling on American roadways.

I would challenge you to find a single constituent in your jurisdiction who has not had someone in their circle of family or acquaintances killed in a traffic-related crash. You know the statistics - last year nearly 43,000 people were killed on American streets. To put that in proportion, that is more than the entire population of Princeton, NJ or the undergraduate student body of my alma mater of Michigan State University. In my lifetime, there have been more than 2 million roadway deaths. Again, 2 million preventable American deaths.

Not taking more urgent action on this is frankly inexcusable. Every single American that you represent is at risk every day. There are immediate, common sense measures that will help. The Building Safer Streets Act is an overdue, basic step. But meaningfully changing those statistics requires more. We lag embarrassingly behind other nations in the fundamental imperative of keeping our citizens alive as they go about their daily lives. If we truly value the sanctity of human life, we need policy priorities that reflect that. That means directing and deploying infrastructure dollars in ways that save lives and drive innovation to reclaim America's lead as the global transportation leader.

Today, to say that safety is our highest priority is quite simply dishonest. Low cost, proven countermeasures go unfunded and face myriad bureaucratic hurdles. Seemingly too small for states to bother with, but too costly for many communities to fund on their own, lifesaving measures languish for decades.

In the 1970's, my parents moved to one of several subdivisions being developed along a county two-lane highway. As kids we could happily bike within our little three street neighborhood but were forbidden from visiting schoolmates in the neighborhood across the street due to the danger that street posed. Now nearly fifty years later, my parents are still there. They are hale and hearty retired 70-year olds. They live just 1.3 miles from the small village post office, library, donut shop and all-important quilt store. They would love nothing more than to be able to walk or bike to town, see friends and keep their bodies and minds sharp. But they can't. The road has only two lanes and no shoulder. Posted at 35 MPH, traffic screams by at over 50 MPH. More subdivisions have sprouted up where farms once were, but half a century later there is still no sidepath or even shoulder space on that road while a parallel state road has been widened twice over the same period and locally both traffic- and obesity-related deaths have risen.

There is another rural road in Michigan - but it could be in any state. This road is where my good friend was struck and killed while jogging. I can't necessarily blame the older man who hit her as he came up over a hill with the early morning sun in his eyes. It is wrong to blame my friend as there was no space to step outside the white edge line. It was terrible to be at the hospital then funeral trying to soothe her 7- and 11-year old daughters and lie that it would be alright. It wouldn't. But in the years since, I often think about the driver. He will never unsee my friend's body hitting his windshield or erase the guilt of killing her and depriving these kids of their mother. I imagine every day he wishes he had driven slower, left later, or never taken that trip at all. I don't think he was a bad man. I do think that was a bad road and bad policy that made it fatal. With an extra four feet of asphalt that allowed for common human error, my friend would be alive, the girls would have their mom, and the driver would be free of that guilt.

Road safety isn't just an issue out in the country. Growing up in DC, my kids had a playground three blocks from our house, but even after they were old enough to go there by themselves, I didn't let them. Despite all the media sensationalism about how dangerous cities are, it wasn't rapists, murderers or thieves I was worried about - it was drivers. Street design standards made it easy for commuters to drive out of town, but made it impossible to build the crosswalks and stop signs that would have allowed my children to leave our yard.

America is failing its people.

Roadway deaths have skyrocketed. Since 2019, fatalities have increased 13% in California, 14% in Pennsylvania, 16% in Oregon, Oklahoma, Mississippi and South Carolina and a whopping 26% in Arkansas.

Other nations show a commitment to life that we are lacking. Just across our border, Canada's roadways are half as deadly.

According to the World Health Organization¹, the traffic-related death rate (deaths per 100,000 population) in the U.S. is 12.4 - putting us in the same class with Indonesia (12.2), Turkey

¹ <https://extranet.who.int/roadsafety/death-on-the-roads/#deaths>

(12.3), Mexico (13.1), Pakistan (14.3) and Afghanistan (15.1). I don't think this is the peer group we are striving for! Egypt (9.7) and Cuba (8.5) dramatically out-perform us. Even if we don't think we are comparable to Norway (2.7) or Sweden (2.8), we cannot claim to be all that different from other sprawling, rural, auto-oriented nations like Australia (5.6) or Canada (5.8) and yet our roadways are more than twice as deadly.

It isn't because Canadians don't text and it certainly is not because Australians don't drink. To my knowledge, neither has superior cars or smarter teenagers or greater engineering prowess.

The roadway death rate is significantly lower in Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea and nearly every European nation because their national leaders have adopted sensible, proactive roadway designs that recognize that people in cars, on bikes and on foot can, at times, make bad decisions and that time-tested, sensible street design can stop bad decisions from becoming fatal mistakes.

Here in the United States, we have adopted policies that seem dedicated to killing innocent Americans. Our roads are designed to encourage high speed driving, with wide straight roadways stripped of any natural indicator of safe or intended speed. We pretend that 24 x 30 inch speed signs telling them to slow down mean more to a driver than every environmental cue the road is giving them to drive faster. And then we blame the driver. Pick any state and you can find a state road where the speed limit changes a dozen times - from 65 MPH down to 35 MPH and back again - but the roadway design doesn't change once. It is nothing short of entrapment.

As our people die by the thousands, other nations are showing their commitment to protecting the lives of their people. Adopting roadway standards that self-regulate speed through design - reducing the need to rely on signage and policing. Not only is this vastly safer for all roadway users - as demonstrated by the numbers - but it is less punitive to drivers themselves. Congestion is relieved when vehicles flow at a managed and consistent speed that is appropriate to the context - whether through a town business district bursting with life or a sparsely populated expanse of farmland.

We need to do two things - prioritize resources for safer streets and make it easier to actually build them. This is just plain common sense.

Pittsburgh has the 4th highest portion of people walking to work and 7th most transit commuters in the country, post pandemic. MANY Pittsburghers rely on walking and transit to get where they need to go. And we have a lot of sidewalk gaps - places where short segments of sidewalk have been heaved up by trees or crumbled to bits through years of freeze and thaw. This makes walking rough for anyone, but virtually impossible for people who use wheelchairs or parents with strollers. So they walk in the street. I think we can agree, this isn't safe.

While I was Pittsburgh's Director of Transportation, and after several years of trying, we secured \$1 million in CMAQ funding from the state. We intended to fix more than 80 sidewalk gaps across three different neighborhoods with the highest concentration of walking- and

transit-dependent residents. We chose the highest priority locations near senior buildings, schools and bus stops. Most of the gaps were small - 20 - 30 feet in length. Restoring these would have benefited more than 35,000 residents and tens of thousands of drivers who daily had to try to avoid pedestrians in the street.

Federal funds were critical to the project. After we got our grant, we were informed that we needed to produce engineering drawings for each and every one of the 80 locations. This meant we would need to spend 10 months and \$300,000 of local money, that we didn't have, to use \$1 million of federal funds to actually build something.

This is ludicrous, wasteful and fiscally irresponsible. No self-respecting professional contractor needs full scale engineering drawings to pour a simple 6 foot wide, 6 inch deep slab of concrete. We could not justify squandering taxpayer dollars for patently unnecessary design drawings just because an administrative system could not differentiate an interchange construction from a sidewalk slab. So we didn't do the project. Rather than give the funds back - as we were tempted to do - we redirected these funds from multiple distributed improvements benefiting many thousands to one improvement on a state route that benefitted far fewer.

In another case, city engineers wanted to put a protected bike lane on a state street that ran through a dense central neighborhood where we had many bicycle commuters. Despite flexposts (flexible delineators) having been long used in the very same application on city managed streets, to use this treatment on a state route required months and months of review and back and forth with state and Federal highway engineers. The delay was so substantial, that by the time this commonplace, common sense safety countermeasure was finally approved, materials were 30% more expensive.

If Congress and the Administration want to save taxpayer money and deliver projects faster, then how do you allow these practices to still exist?

Let me give you just one more example. A decade or so ago, the state DOT made safety "improvements" to a major state route in the city. They widened travel lanes and added a center turn lane, but posted a lower speed limit. Of course, instead of slowing traffic, wider lanes led to more speeding. Without on street parking, pedestrians had a longer walk to cross and no marked crossing where they could cross safely. The major employer on the street - a large car dealership - repeatedly complained that its customers and employees were in danger as they routinely crossed from the repair shop on one side of the street to the showroom on the other. Near misses were constant until, in a tragedy that could have been easily prevented, a young female employee of a business on that road was struck in a horrific car crash. She suffered massive injuries that left her hospitalized for over eight months. The City engaged State DOT engineers to move quickly and together we crafted a package of low cost, but effective safety improvements - crosswalks, better lighting, and a protected pedestrian refuge island. However, when we approached the state DOT for funds to implement the plan, we were told federal funds were not available despite (or perhaps because of) its low cost. Although it was a state route,

the city was told it would need to pay for the safety improvements, and, given the urgency, we did.

Let me be clear - Pittsburgh is not a city flush with cash. In fact, my chief traffic engineer often felt she had to resist putting in a multitude of crosswalks. It wasn't that she didn't support them or they weren't warranted - it was because she was worried the city wouldn't have enough staff or money to repaint them every 5 years, as is needed.

As a citizen and professional, I am frankly dumbfounded that a nation as smart and wealthy as the United States, with billions of federal dollars flowing to states every year, cannot find a way to fund and build a \$5,000 crosswalk or any of a number of other low cost proven safety countermeasures. I would ask you here today, how much is an American life worth to you?

The definition of policy inertia is perpetuating established procedures, even when, in the face of evidence, they are counterproductive to desired goals - and U.S. transportation policy is rife with inertia.

Right now, you have the opportunity to make big changes through small projects. The Building Safer Streets Act will streamline project delivery by exempting no nonsense, no debate safety measures. With this you can eliminate outdated and restrictive provisions in the Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) that limit local flexibility and the exercise of best engineering judgment. You can take the logical step to preclude performance targets that allow roadway fatalities to increase! You can incentivize States to facilitate and fund low-cost, quick build local safety improvements. As we start to think about the next infrastructure authorization, you can craft transportation programs and policies that actually reflect safety as the highest priority, rather than just saying it. No more policy inertia!

I deeply appreciate the work of this subcommittee and all that you do for the communities I have been pleased to live in, serve and advise. I look forward to your questions.

Thank you.