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How Jersey City Got to Zero Traffic Deaths on Its Streets

This town outside of New York City scored the biggest traffic safety success story of 2022. Here's how they did it.

By [John Surico](#). December 28, 2022

It's been another bad year on the roads of New Jersey. Mirroring [national trends](#), the Garden State saw a spike in traffic fatalities after the pandemic's onset in 2020, and the pattern hasn't let up. Roadway deaths jumped nearly 20% between 2020 and 2021, and have come down less than a percentage point since, within a [morbid margin of error](#) of 2021's high.

But a different story is playing out in Jersey City.

In 2018, the booming mini-metropolis across the river from New York City [made headlines](#) for being the first city in New Jersey to adopt Vision Zero, the international traffic safety framework that established the goal of zero traffic fatalities. Several other cities across the US did so as well. But Jersey City has succeeded where [many have fallen short](#), going a full year without a [single traffic fatality](#) on its roads.

That Vision Zero milestone comes with a caveat — it only reflects the roads that the city maintains. Several major corridors that cut through its downtown belong to Hudson County or the state, and have [continued to rack up crash victims](#). Still, Jersey City is about to end its safest year on record, bucking a deadly national trend. And local leaders are intent on pushing forward with more improvements that will eventually encompass more of the city and region.

To explain how they managed to pull off a remarkable road safety reversal, Jersey City policymakers, advocates, community members and planners zeroed in on several key ingredients. It's a formula that could serve as a model for other municipalities as the US stares down a deadly crisis on its streets.

Show, Don't Tell

The area near St. Pauls Avenue between JFK Boulevard and Tonnele Avenue is a tangle of thoroughfares and jurisdictions. It's also been a longtime traffic safety headache for local residents; drivers tend to barrel down St. Pauls — a city street — as a cut-through to avoid Route 139, the often-packed state highway that funnels drivers to the Holland Tunnel.

So, after surveys, audits and light-touch interventions like speed humps and crosswalks, city planners tried something else. One week in April, a crew descended on St. Pauls and [installed small-diameter "mini-roundabouts"](#) at two intersections, using whatever materials the city had handy: traffic cones, planters, barrels, plastic delineators, paint. The instant traffic circles — the city's first — forced drivers to slow down as they negotiated the crossings with pedestrians and other vehicles.

The roundabouts were only temporary — after a week, they disappeared, as promised. The city found that traffic volumes increased even as speeds [came down](#) about 10%, and the feedback from surveyed residents was overwhelmingly positive: 72% of respondents supported making the circles permanent. They were also asked to later vote on three more redesigns, one of which briefly converted St. Pauls into a one-way for two weeks in late November.

These kinds of pilots have become the city's preferred method of engagement, says Barkha Patel, the city's director of infrastructure — a new role that combines transportation and public space. Community meetings in advance of road redesigns [famously tend to go sideways](#), while the actual physicality of a demonstration helps to build consensus, albeit imperfect. It also reaches people who might not be able to make it to a meeting or Zoom at 6 p.m. on a weeknight. Instead, it meets them where they live.

"We'll do notices, let people know what it is, and then for a few days, staff will be out there to interact with the public and explain what's going on, and how to use the improvement," said Patel. "Then we'll take it away whenever we've committed to it. Because that transparency with the community is a really big part of it, too."



The Manhattan skyline is seen from Jersey City, New Jersey. Photographer: Christopher Occhicone/Bloomberg



fresh bike lane in downtown Jersey City. Cycling rates have grown as the city has added protected infrastructure. Photo: John Surico/Bloomberg CityLab

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“I’ve Never Filled Out a Permit”

Jersey City is the rare municipality that has embraced the spirit of [tactical urbanism](#) — a practice where quick DIY fixes are deployed to nudge officials to make more permanent changes. That approach is what attracted [Street Plans](#), a design and planning firm that helped the city write its ambitious [bike master plan](#), which followed a similar approach.

“I’ve never filled out a permit here!” Mike Lydon, the firm’s co-founder, told me as we walked around Jersey City’s downtown. “Typically you’re convincing engineers for months at a time, and they’re hemming and hawing, arms crossed. The only thing I’ve had to do is sometimes let the parking department know to go bag the meters or put up signs that say you can’t park here in the morning. That’s it.”

We stood in front of Grove Street, a popular area with development arising around the PATH station there. The road, steps from City Hall, [had](#) a two-way bike lane installed in 2019. It was then converted to a one-way street during the early days of the pandemic, to [make space](#) for a pop-up pedestrian plaza with outdoor dining. Elsewhere, [vehicle-restricted “Slow Streets”](#) emerged, and a [car-free transformation](#) of a stretch of Newark Avenue was [improved and made permanent](#).

“We took advantage of less cars on the street,” said Mayor Steve Fulop in an interview at his office. “And we said, let’s try to do things that we probably couldn’t do as easily under regular circumstances. That included a lot of redesigning of roads.”

That effort preceded 2022’s [Year of Open Space](#), a themed series of public space pop-ups where residents were invited to see different versions of what their street or corner could look like. Street Plans designed several of the parklets, which had free programming, food and workshops.

“This is one of the most densely populated cities in the country. There aren’t really blank slates to design new parks. So we’ve had to get really creative for increasing public space,” said Patel.

Try, Try Again

In 2020, the city’s willingness to experiment led it to launch a pilot with Via, the company that dominates the US market for microtransit — on-demand shared transportation services. (The [February announcement](#) was overshadowed by another press conference later that day, for the city’s first Covid-19 restrictions.) But even as the pandemic clobbered transit ridership overall, the fleet of purple vans quickly hit its goal of 1,000 rides a week, and then [expanded](#) service to weekends. It [hit](#) its millionth ride mark in August, over two years after the launch.

Microtransit has a very [mixed record](#) in North America, as many programs launched in small towns and rural areas as replacements for fixed-route bus systems have [struggled with high costs and low efficiency](#). Jersey City’s approach was to prioritize the periphery: Rides can only be summoned in outlying areas not well served by existing transit, and rides to transit stops cost a city-subsidized \$2. That might help explain its popularity during the pandemic; it primarily attracted neighborhoods where frontline workers were more likely to live. Nearly 90% of riders are non-white, and about half are low-income.

“A lot of other cities have said to these companies, ‘Come and do whatever you can to fix our transit,’” said Patel. “But we wanted to be intentional when we co-created it with Via. We didn’t just want a bunch of vans clogging downtown.”

Alex Lavoie, a chief operating officer at Via, described the company’s Jersey City program as “primarily a first- and last-mile use case,” noting that “Jersey City has some great connectivity, but there are parts that are transit deserts, and quite disconnected historically.”

Currently, there are more than 40 Via vans tooling around Jersey City. On a recent chilly morning, I spotted several of them dropping off riders at Journal Square, a major transportation hub. (PATH stations make up four of the top five destinations.) Riders who I spoke with briefly as they rushed to work all said they enjoyed the service, citing cost and convenience.

Via’s arrival in the city’s mobility ecosystem also helped on the traffic safety front, by getting some drivers off the roads — transit trips are [vastly safer](#) than car trips in the US

Jersey City’s obsession with piloting also extends to operations, as seen in how its bicycle infrastructure continues to evolve.



During the pandemic, Jersey City managed to carve out more space for pedestrian use in downtown streets. Many of those changes have been made permanent. Photo: John Surico/Bloomberg CityLab



A Via microtransit van in Jersey City in 2021. Photographer: Gabby Jones/Bloomberg

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Most local bike lanes I saw on previous visits were of standard ilk, striped with acrylic green or white paint; a few were separated from traffic with plastic flexposts. But I noticed a shift in more recent weeks. Many lanes, especially newer ones stretching north to Hoboken — the state's other Vision Zero city — were coated in Endurablend, a polymerized cement coating whose dimpled pattern makes the paint appear as part of the asphalt. And rather than just flexposts, they were now protected by all sorts of things: concrete Jersey barriers, barrels, cones or vehicle parking.

Advocates have pushed the city to constantly tinker with new ways to bolster the system — due in some part to concern that future administrations could yank them out. So bike lanes are improved systematically. There is an inherent cost benefit as well: Rather than constantly repainting lanes or fixing flattened flex posts, the city saves money in the long run by investing in more robust materials. Bike advocates say that the upgrades help cement the infrastructure as a part of the streetscape, attracting new riders.

"This makes cycling more visible," said Ayla Schemer, the president of [Bike JC](#), an advocacy group. "Yes, it allows the city to learn and adjust. But it also makes people who wouldn't be as willing to cycle be more confident that it's a serious thing. A flattened flexpost can dash that."

The Politics of Safety

Schermer's group sits on the Vision Zero Task Force, a group stipulated by law that meets with the mayor's team every quarter to discuss progress. So does [Safe Streets Jersey City](#), founded by a local couple, Kara Hrabosky and Paul Bellan-Boyer, in 2013 after they lost their neighbor in a car crash. The group's new president, Jimmy Lee, said the meetings help keep the city on track.

"It's not enough to only adopt Vision Zero as a goal," said Lee. "I think there has to be a real commitment in terms of hiring professionals for which safety is the primary goal. I'm not a traffic expert, but it does seem a lot of the orthodoxy in engineering is the opposite of that."

Just about everyone I spoke with for this story mentioned the support of Mayor Fulop — now on his third term — as a key factor. (As well as Patel as the brains within City Hall.) In the five years since we last spoke, it's clear that the mayor has now mastered the parlance of street safety: When we spoke, he sounded more like a planner, talking in detail about future plans for bus rapid transit and bike lanes.

But that's where it gets tough. Another term I heard often: "low-hanging fruit." So far, most of the city's interventions have been downtown, and largely avoided loss of on-street parking. (In fact, some, like St. Pauls Avenue, might even add some.) And typically they've involved roads that had some space to spare.

"We always started in locations where we could say, 'You're not losing too much,'" said Patel. "Our first bike lane project couldn't be one where we were removing an entire lane of parking, because we knew we would never be able to do another one again. We tried to minimize the perceived trade-offs as much as possible."

The idea is to focus on more politically palatable locations, show what's possible, and then expand outward from there. So far, the strategy seems to be working: not only have traffic fatalities fallen, but cycling ridership is way up. This last quarter, Citi Bike, which operates in Jersey City, saw usage increase to more than 15,000 peak rides per week on average.

The hope is that people will notice. That includes council members in wards that are more car-dependent, as well as state and county officials. And with federal infrastructure dollars on the way to state coffers, residents are betting that local results will form a groundswell.

"We're definitely heartened to see the numbers go down in Jersey City, but we don't necessarily think it's going to hold forever. It's not that safe of a city yet," Lee said. "There's a lot more to do, but just being able to see that tremendous progress should be a clear call to the state and county that Vision Zero is possible and achievable. So let's work on it."

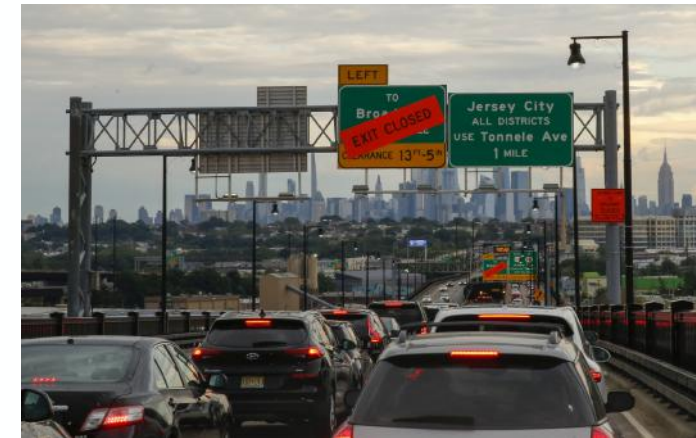
Source: Bloomberg / City Lab / Transportation: [How Jersey City Got to Zero Traffic Deaths on Its Streets](#)



New improvements to the city's bike lanes include adding protections like parking lanes and concrete barriers. Photo: John Surico/Bloomberg CityLab



A stretch of Newark Avenue was transformed into a pedestrian-only mall. Photo: John Surico/Bloomberg CityLab



Cars inch their way along the route to New York City in Jersey City in August 2022. Photo by Kena Betancur/VIEWpress via Getty Images