

Jonathan Maus ([00:01](#)):

Welcome to the BikePortland Podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Maus. In this episode, I'll take you to an event that I attended on Sunday, November 19th. It was the World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims. This is an internationally observed event that happens all over the world every year. It's recognized by the World Health Organization and the United Nations as a way to take a moment or two and just consider the vast toll that traffic death takes on our communities. The local Portland edition of this was organized by the Street Trust, Oregon Walks and Families for Safe Streets. Families for Safe Streets is a national group made up of surviving family members of people who've been killed in traffic crashes. And unfortunately, we have enough of those folks in Oregon and Washington that there is actually a local chapter. So the event started at the offices of the Street Trust over in Lloyd Center mall.

([01:02](#)):

And Oregon Walks organized a walk from the mall over to Veterans Memorial Coliseum. There were about three dozen people on the walk and it was a really short walk, and they marched as a group over to the Coliseum where there was a memorial demonstration set up. They actually had 60 sleeping bags laid out in rows with a tag on each one that had the victim's name, the date of their death, and where the crash occurred that were meant to represent body bags of all the people that have been killed while using streets in Portland so far this year. And if you're wondering what the Street Trust is going to do with 60 sleeping bags, they actually were used not just to represent body bags in a very visceral visual way, but they also underscore the work the Street Trust has done with homeless services organizations to better understand a really disturbing issue in Portland, which is how there is such a disproportionate amount of people who are killed in traffic crashes, who also happen to be living on the street and experiencing homelessness at the time they're killed.

([02:09](#)):

Even though homeless people make up less than 1% of the population in the entire county, they're representing almost 50% of the total amount of pedestrians killed in traffic crashes. So to start off this episode, what you'll hear first are a few conversations I had with people who took part in the walk from Lloyd Center Mall over to Memorial Coliseum. After that, I'll share some of the speeches from the formal part of the program, and then I'll close out this episode with a little interview I was able to do with the executive director of the Street Trust, Sarah Iannarone right after she spoke. So let's get into those first interviews. Again, these were interviews I did while walking with folks as we went over to the memorial demonstration.

([02:58](#)):

Hi, how are you? I'm Jonathan from BikePortland. Just curious, you can tell me why you came out to this event today.

Lena Wiley ([03:04](#)):

I am a pedestrian and so in my daily life I encounter all sorts of unsafe situations and it's just really important to me to build safer streets both for myself but also for the community. So wanted to support.

Jonathan Maus ([03:21](#)):

When you say you're pedestrian, define that a little bit. Do you walk to transit stops or you just walk more than just around the neighborhood? How do you define you being a pedestrian?

Lena Wiley ([03:31](#)):

I walk everywhere. I walk to work, walk to the grocery store, take the bus. I do bike some places, but I don't really have the nerve to bike most places since it could be a bit more scary to someone who's not used to it.

Jonathan Maus ([03:45](#)):

Given what you've seen walking, is there something you wish the city would do more of differently when it comes to making the street safe?

Lena Wiley ([03:51](#)):

I think in my life mostly like turns... Unprotected turns, a lot of red lights where people could just turn right. Those feel the most dangerous. I'm not totally sure what the solution is there, but if there's a way to mitigate that safety, whether it's pausing so that pedestrians can go first, or having more built-in... Like designing the roads better so that it feels safer, there's more visibility for walkers. I think that that would really help me feel safer.

Jonathan Maus ([04:23](#)):

Cool. Thanks for chatting.

Lena Wiley ([04:24](#)):

Of course. Thank you.

Brendon Haggerty ([04:27](#)):

My name is Brendon Haggerty. I'm the Healthy Homes and community manager at Multnomah County Health Department. One thing that we do in public health is marshal the data to help us tell the story of what we're seeing. So that's something we've been focusing on for the past couple of years to get a more in-depth understanding of the really concerning trends. And there are kind of three big things that are red flags for public health, right? When it comes to traffic crashes. And one is that, it's the leading cause of death, unintentional injury is the third leading cause of death in Multnomah County. We observe large racial disparities. And the third big flag for us is the trends going the wrong way.

Jonathan Maus ([05:05](#)):

From the county's perspective. Do you ever try to identify the things that could be done to make that trend go the opposite way and sort of reduce death? Is that something the county is working on in terms of more... Not just the research side, but what are the preventative steps?

Brendon Haggerty ([05:19](#)):

The report we published this summer includes some recommendations that are largely based around the safe systems approach, which other agencies in the region are also embracing. But it's something that's shown a lot of success in other cities, in other countries. So that's kind of the center of our thinking on it. We're the local public health authority, so that gives us a different role from the other agencies. We don't have as much of a role in infrastructure, right? But the outcomes are where we start to pay attention and try to change systems.

Claire Vlach ([05:57](#)):

Yeah, I am Claire Vlach and I'm with Oregon Walks. The main thing I was thinking about on our way here was how grateful I am that my family has not been touched by traffic violence because we walk and bike most places that we go, and I always feel vulnerable and I'm grateful that my children are around and I wish that everybody's children were still around. Everybody's family members.

Jonathan Maus ([06:29](#)):

And you brought them with you. Were you worried about what they saw? Did they ask questions? How would you talk about this issue of violence on the streets as someone who does have their kids with them a lot?

Claire Vlach ([06:41](#)):

I don't think I needed to talk about it with them specifically today because we talk about it every day, right? Every day on the streets. They see cars acting unsafely every time when Max is... On their own bike, whenever we pull up to a stop sign, I say, "Even if you don't have a stop sign and the cars do, you have to slow down and pay attention because sometimes cars don't stop." So they know, they're aware.

Jackie Yerby ([07:13](#)):

Hey, Jonathan. It's good to see you. I'm Jackie Yerby [inaudible 00:07:17]. And I'm also a board member for the Street Trust. I've been on the board for a few years. Before that, I was on the board of the Community Cycling Center. I'm on the board of Cycle Oregon. I care a lot about biking. I care a lot about people being safe on the streets. I actually got hit in a crosswalk years ago on, it was like 120 Second at Stark. I was in the crosswalk and I remember making this calculation as I was walking from the max down 120 Second, like, oh, there's a crosswalk closer, that's not a... I think it had flashing lights, but I was like, no, I'm going to cross in the crosswalk with the traffic light because that'll be safer. And it was daylight and an impaired driver, driving with a suspended license, actually no license and no insurance hit me in the crosswalk. And thankfully, he was breaking as he hit me. But every once in a while I think about that. And I think if he had been going faster, he would've pushed me into traffic and I wouldn't be here talking to you.

Jonathan Maus ([08:21](#)):

Why did you come today? What were you hoping you would feel today? And then what was your reaction to being here today?

Jackie Yerby ([08:27](#)):

I came because I felt like it just feels important to represent and reflect and remember and honor the people killed in traffic violence by people in cars, and also to honor and support the family members of people who have lost loved ones to traffic violence. And I got to say, as I walked past the sleeping bags and that representation and to see some of those names, I got really choked up. I mean, I'm watching them now load up the sleeping bag and it's a really powerful image. I wish more people could see that and recognize that these are real people and that hey, slowing down, actually stopping at the stop sign as opposed to running through it or making the right, they might save two minutes in getting to their destination, but that small thing could change their lives and destroy somebody else's.

Jonathan Maus ([09:28](#)):

Can I ask how you're feeling about the traffic state in the deaths? I know you see the headlines, you see the press releases come out. Are you frustrated, demoralized, angry? Are you sort of resigned? How are you feeling right now as an advocate?

Jackie Yerby ([09:44](#)):

I am frustrated and angry, not resigned. Never resigned. And even as I say that, I pause, I'm here on my bike today and I thought about not riding here and I think about not riding a lot. I have an E-Bike. And I got an E-Bike to ride around town more, to do short trips more. And I do this mental calculus of like how safe am I going to feel on my E-Bike? And there are many times that I choose to drive because mentally that feels safer, right? And I also do long distance bike riding. I don't ride nearly as much as I used to because I don't feel safe on Portland streets. I don't feel safe out in the country... Just the way that people drive. But I'm not resigned because of organizations like the Street Trust and Bike Loud, excellent advocacy journalism like BikePortland. And I feel like we're here and we're going to keep working and advocating and pressuring PBOT and ODOT to do the right thing. And I almost dropped an F-bomb there. Yeah.

Jonathan Maus ([10:52](#)):

I hear you. Thanks, Jackie.

Jackie Yerby ([10:54](#)):

Yeah.

([10:54](#)):

Thank you, so much.

Jonathan Maus ([10:57](#)):

So now we moved into the more formal part of the event where you'll hear remarks from Sarah Iannarone from the Street Trust, Michelle DuBarry from Families for Safe Streets, Wendy Serrano from the City of Portland's Bureau of Transportation and Charlene McGee from Multnomah County.

Sarah Iannarone ([11:18](#)):

My name is Sarah Iannarone. I'm the executive director of the Street Trust. This is the Portland Oregon observance of World Day of Remembrance. It's a somber occasion. What you see on display behind me is 60 sleeping bags. They're symbolically representing body bags. And in fact, when we did the order a few months ago, we were optimistic, I guess that 60 body bags would be enough at this time of year. But we'd actually just found out Thursday morning that the sixty-first person was killed on Portland streets. So we didn't even predict with enough accuracy how intense this conflict could be. Before you today, very solemnly, we generally try to find joy in our work and come together around the things that we can get excited to transform like street plazas and bike buses and group rides and improvements to our system. But today is not one of those joyful days.

([12:15](#)):

It's a somber day, and we really do need to pay close attention to the fact that the statistics that we're talking about represent each of them a precious life in our community. Someone who was beloved mother, a sister, father, brother, nephew, worker, leader, killed on our streets. We're here at Veterans Memorial Coliseum and it's very symbolic as well. We need to not forget that we are facing a public

health epidemic and that this death, this vast amount of death is preventable, wholly preventable. If we address the gaps in our failing system, we actually could save these lives. We are reminded that life is fragile and we know that humans err. There's mistakes that we all make hundreds of times a day even, but we are not designing systems that are built to account for human error. We're not building systems that account for our most vulnerable neighbors.

[\(13:24\)](#):

And again, the fact that these symbolic body bags are sleeping bags, we chose to do that this year because we know that people experiencing homelessness are overrepresented in city of Portland's, pedestrian fatalities, it was as high as 70% two years ago. This year, it'll probably be on order of about 50%, if not a majority of pedestrian fatalities on Portland's streets. So rather than using body bags, we're using sleeping bags, which then we will donate to our partner shelters after this event. Oregon's facing a critical challenge. Some of you are seeing press releases from ODOT, how we might not get our streets paid this winter if we don't come up with money for operations and maintenance of the system. And I just want to say that I don't like that trade off. I don't like being posed with the trade off that if we don't come up with new revenue streams, then we might not have money to ensure that our streets are passable and safe for every Oregonian.

[\(14:24\)](#):

I believe that that is our right. I do not believe that that is a privilege, and I believe that we need to fight to make sure that we're not making trade-offs between safety investments and basic systems' maintenance for the streets of our state or our city, because we've heard that from other agencies as well. So I just want to flag that for you, that safety is not optional. It is mandatory and that a system that is safe for our most vulnerable street users is a basic human right. We're looking at a surge in traffic fatalities where we've gone in over a decade from around 350 fatalities a year to over 600. It's not acceptable. Any other system that was failing at this rate, we would have task forces, right? Looking into why this is happening. And for some reason, we can't seem to make the commitment that we need to structurally transform and radically transform our transportation system to stop people from dying on it. And so today we're standing here in memory, sure, but also in advocacy because all of us together represent whole networks of people who can change outcomes. When we work together to make that happen. In unity, I believe is where we find our strength. And I think that is where we can find hope today too. Coming together, making sure that we are working together, facing in the same direction on some of these issues.

Michelle DuBarry ([15:50](#)):

My name is Michelle DuBarry. I am a member of the Oregon and Southwest Washington Families for Safe Streets chapter. All of us have lost a family member in a traffic crash or suffered a serious injury. As the founder of Families for Safe Streets or Amy Cohen likes to say, "We are a group that no one should ever have to join." It's been 13 years since I lost my one-year-old son, Seamus. He was struck by a careless driver in a crosswalk where he was being pushed in a stroller by his dad who was also injured in the crash. They were coming home from the grocery store after a morning spent playing at the park.

[\(16:33\)](#):

This year, I traveled to New York City for the Vision Zero Cities conference. I met dozens of other bereaved family members who were turning their grief into advocacy. One of them told me about showing up to the crash site on the morning after his wife was killed with a bucket and some soapy water to wash the blood off the road. These deaths and injuries to people we love are violent. They are sudden, they are impossibly painful for everyone involved and they are entirely preventable. Every day, I

think about the simple crosswalk improvements that could have prevented the crash that killed my son and our transportation agencies repeated insistence that there is no money to save lives. We have the solutions. Other cities have solved the problem of traffic violence. We need politicians and our transportation leaders to act. We need them to treat this crisis with the urgency at demands. So thank you again for being here, for joining the call for accountability and action from our elected officials. Thank you.

Jonathan Maus ([17:50](#)):

Next up was Wendy Serrano. She's the equity and inclusion manager for the Portland Bureau of Transportation.

Wendy Serrano ([17:56](#)):

14 years ago this month, my grandmother was killed by an [inaudible 00:18:01] as she attempted to cross SR 99 near Gladstone. I was 19 years old and my world was shattered. She was 60 years old. In 2003, my father's father was killed riding his bike in Oxnard, California as he was struck by a vehicle making a right turn at an intersection. I've dedicated my professional career to advocacy, to lifting voices from my community and our everyday realities. As the equity manager at the Portland Bureau of Transportation, I play a role in centering systems that are responsive to those realities. I know what is at stake. I know my colleagues are committed to leading their work with equity and have made a practice to advocate for projects and programs that serve our most vulnerable communities. I also know that our funding formula is broken. We simply don't have the needed budget to make meaningful investments across the many dire needs of our infrastructure.

([18:56](#)):

And until safety infrastructure gets sustainable, prioritized funding, we will continue to see these preventable deaths in our streets. Highway 99 where my grandmother's life was taken, operates at a high speed with limited signalized crossings, little medians or access management. 14 years later, ODOT, it's considering a safety project. They've done the planning, lack securing funding to make it a reality. Impairment while driving. Our society's value and desire for car center infrastructure are all factors in our progress towards this issue. This work is hard, is technical, tedious and slow, but we need to keep advocating on all fronts to change things for the better and not to maintain the status quo.

([19:41](#)):

We need to be clear about whose safety we should be prioritizing, whose comfort our governments and entities should be prioritizing in our streets. And we need to be clear about who are the most vulnerable and who are the people who will continue to die in our streets. My grandmother was more my mother. She was the matriarch of our family. A person that love to dance the night away and good tequila. She showed you love through her meals, through her acts of service, a hardworking woman. In my eyes, she could do it all. She should be here today continuing to bring joy to those around her. Her death was preventable. She needed a safe crossing. My grandfather's death was also preventable. We should all be able to get to our destination safely, particularly when we're walking or cycling in our streets.

([20:31](#)):

Thank you.

Charlene McGee ([20:38](#)):

My name is Charlene McGee and I have the privilege of serving as the Director for Prevention and Health Promotion Unit at the county. And I really want to make the emphasis on prevention, which is

part of why we're here, which is why we do this work. We know and believe that traffic violence, traffic deaths, traffic fatalities are preventable. Unfortunately, when we look at the county data, we look at the leading causes of death, this falls within that. In Multnomah County, in the city of Portland and across Oregon, we know the communities that bear the weight. I don't need to speak to them. Unfortunately, we know our black and brown communities, we know individuals who are experiencing economic disparities are within that number. We also know that behind every statistic lies a person, a friend, a family member who absences keenly felt. And as we reflect, let us unite in a collective call to action.

[\(21:38\)](#):

The need for intentional collaboration across our jurisdictions is clear. In Multnomah County and across Oregon, the traffic data tells a very sombering tales of the impact of our communities and what lives we can prevent. Each incident echoes a public health epidemic affecting physical and mental wellbeing. Less leverage the data that we know to inform targeted strategies. Together we must develop robust communication campaigns and advocate for policy systems and environmental changes that will safeguard lives. For the outcries and pain and trauma of loved ones forced to leverage their pain and grief into collective action, we must act. Beyond the immediate toll, traffic violence is intertwined with our climate challenges. Sustainable transportation is vital for healthier communities and a healthier planet. Today, let's heed on this collective call of action and intention the collaboration across our jurisdictions. In memory of those we've lost, let us be catalysts for change. Through our sheer commitment, we can build safer roads and protect the ones we love.

[\(22:49\)](#):

Thank you.

Jonathan Maus [\(22:54\)](#):

And I'll end this episode with an interview I did with Sarah Iannarone, the Street Trust executive director after she gave her remarks at the event.

[\(23:05\)](#):

Here we're again at another day of remembrance, and I know you personally am through the street trust, work on all sorts of different levels to try to create urgency for this stuff. And you kind of expressed the frustration around the trends are still not great. Can you point to something concrete? What would you like to see done differently? You can't just say more money. Is there something you could see differently since I know you're around conversations around the different committees and the different legislative stuff. Where is a fundamental shift that we could be pushing for that would help these trends get to a better place?

Sarah Iannarone [\(23:38\)](#):

Well, I'm always going to talk about the money, but let's talk about how of the money, right? We need a concerted statewide investment strategy that has a buy-in from every level of government, and that comes from leadership. So there needs to be a unified vision from the highest level about what the benefits of these investments are going to be for Oregonians and someone to actually be clear, again, from a position of leadership about what the cost of not doing better. Without that vision and without that unified leadership to come up with a statewide investment strategy for safe streets for all Oregonians, I don't know that we're going to be able to accomplish our goals, especially when you look at our urban development patterns. So even if PBOT starts to get it right and you can't afford to live inside city of Portland and you're pushed to an outer lying city where that city isn't doing it right, we're just going to keep continuing to reinforce the disparities that we've had for generations here in Oregon.

Jonathan Maus ([24:38](#)):

When people hear funding, well, they may think of a lot of different things, but is there something... When you say funding specifically, are you talking money for more infrastructure? What would that funding look like for you? What would be at the point of that sort of priority list, if that funding was to become available? Is it what you think people would expect? Is it going to just be infrastructure, crosswalk, stuff like that? Or are there other things that we'd use money for?

Sarah Iannarone ([25:00](#)):

Well, we have a lot of money. We have about \$10 billion in mega projects already teed up in the Greater Portland metro region just on highway projects. And when you look at the need statewide, I think we should do it from a data-driven perspective. There are certain things that we're going to have to find money for. ODOT has a 1.4 billion liability in ADA curb cuts that they're mandated they need to do just similar to Portland's Creek settlement, right? Where we have to bring the system up to ADA compliance. It's the law. So you've got 1.4 billion there that we're going to be spending.

([25:33](#)):

All right, now let's look at the statistics. Let's look at the most dangerous roadways. What are the intersections that have other investments going to be made? And let's actually come up with a plan based on where money is going to be spent, where it should be spent, where people are dying and where actually some of these investments could create walkable, livable main streets for communities across Oregon. I mean, a lot of folks travel to the Oregon coast so they can enjoy a beautiful walkable city like Cannon Beach, right? Being able to go from where they're staying to get ice cream or pizza with their family on foot and walk home with the groceries. And that's a vacation. We could have that every day in communities across Oregon. We know how to do it. We just need to commit the resources to making it happen.

Jonathan Maus ([26:14](#)):

Can you say anything about what I hear when you see these headlines of record deaths, there's this reaction among some folks where it's like, well, Vision Zero is failing, right? What do you think when you hear that? I didn't hear necessarily Vision Zero mentioned today. Is there a different organizing principle that you think could be helpful? And how do you reply when people say, "Well, Vision Zero is terrible, we shouldn't be doing that."

Sarah Iannarone ([26:38](#)):

I mean, sure, we should be trying to get towards zero traffic deaths, but as a policy, if we're turning in the wrong direction, it's not really working. I'm pretty optimistic about the work going on actually at metro. The safe systems approach I really do think is a little bit more integrated where we're looking at different elements and really trying to come up with a plan for how we spend at the programmatic, at the educational, at the infrastructure level, and also just how we use data differently and how we plan differently as well. Some simple things that may not seem like they would make a huge difference, were advocates working to un-billion what ODOT had in the RTP as 1.2 billion in safety projects, right? Just saying, "Hey, could you actually take those out of a bundle and make a list and make a priority list and start holding folks accountable, line item by line item for..."

([27:35](#)):

Okay, where does that track with the data? What is that definition of safety? And how is this a safety project? It really is about clarity and accountability and transparency and transportation decision-making as well as the more holistic systemic safe systems approach.

Jonathan Maus ([27:52](#)):

So for instance, when ODOT says the I-Five Rose Quarter project's a safety project, you think that's something maybe advocates should be skeptical of or look more closely and be like, how are we really defining safety here?

Sarah Iannarone ([28:00](#)):

Or maybe we actually need to more effectively define safety either through statute or through planning rules, right? Because if that does qualify as a safety project now and that's not where people are dying and we aren't able to even get the 135 to 185 million for Inner Powell Boulevard where we know people die month after month, year after year, then there is a disconnect in what's actually happening in our system based on maybe what the definition of safety currently is. And whether we have to redefine that or how we as advocates... That's our job, but also the agencies should be doing that work as well.

Jonathan Maus ([28:36](#)):

Anything else you want to say to folks?

Sarah Iannarone ([28:38](#)):

I just want to appreciate everyone for coming out here and supporting this work from whatever angle that they're doing it at, it's all important. So onward everybody in hope and optimism.

Jonathan Maus ([28:47](#)):

Thanks, Sarah.

Sarah Iannarone ([28:48](#)):

Yeah. Thanks, Jonathan.

Jonathan Maus ([28:51](#)):

That was Sarah Iannarone, the executive director of the Street Trust talking to me after she spoke at the World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims event on Sunday, November 19th. And that'll do it for this episode of the BikePortland podcast. Thanks again for listening and thanks to those of you who support BikePortland financially. Subscribers, if you're listening, I am very grateful for your support. And if you are not a subscriber yet, you can find out how to become one at bikeportland.org/subscribe. You can also find all of our links to various ways to send a financial contribution at bikeportland.org/support. This is community journalism we're doing here at BikePortland and it takes support from the community for it to survive. I'm your host, Jonathan Maus, and until next time, I'll see you in the streets.