A Hollywood Intersection Gets a Vision Zero Makeover

BY JIM BENNING

On a cool afternoon in the heart of Hollywood, as tourists gawked at Batman and Superman impersonators in front of the Dolby Theatre while a guy in a bucket hat did the moonwalk, Tim Fremaux looked out at pedestrians crossing the busy street and smiled.

Not long ago, the intersection of Hollywood Boulevard and Highland Avenue (pictured) had a reputation for being crowded, chaotic, and collision prone. But as part of Los Angeles' Vision Zero efforts, Fremaux and other L.A. Department of Transportation engineers reconfigured its traffic signals. Rather than allowing cars and pedestrians to cross in the same direction at the same time, as they had for years, the engineers installed a “scramble” crosswalk that permits pedestrians to cross only when all cars stop, and then prohibits pedestrians from crossing when automobiles roll.

Initial results have been promising. Before the change, the intersection averaged 1.5 pedestrian-involved collisions a year, with other crashes occurring, too. After the change took effect in November 2015, the number of collisions dropped. In 2016, only two minor crashes occurred, and neither involved pedestrians.

While few L.A. intersections might qualify for scrambles like this one—high pedestrian volume and a history of crashes typically are needed—Fremaux believes the drop in collisions shows Vision Zero's potential in L.A.

Los Angeles is relatively new to the movement. City officials approved the initiative in 2015 and soon after set about analyzing local accident data. Their findings were striking: While pedestrians and cyclists were involved in only 14 percent of collisions, they accounted for 43 percent of all traffic deaths in 2014. What's more, almost two-thirds of all fatal accidents occurred on only 6 percent of city streets.

In January, the city announced a plan to cut traffic deaths by 20 percent by year's end, and to eliminate traffic fatalities altogether by 2025. Under the plan, engineers prioritize safety over traffic flow, and emphasize changes that will protect those most at risk: children, older adults, cyclists, and pedestrians. Officials are targeting corridors and intersections where serious and fatal accidents involving pedestrians and cyclists occur most often.

Among the strategies the city plans to employ: extend curbs at some intersections to improve visibility and reduce distances that pedestrians must cross; add “leading pedestrian intervals” at key crosswalks to give pedestrians a few seconds to begin crossing—and catch drivers' attention—before cars get the green light; and enforce existing traffic laws. A $2 million education campaign is also in the works, and the Auto Club is supporting this effort with safety resources and other informative materials.

Vision Zero represents a major shift in thinking about traffic safety. For a city that's synonymous with car culture—L.A. did, after all, serve as the backdrop for the movies Speed and The Fast and the Furious—that's no small thing. But Fremaux believes the time has come. "The culture," he says, "is ripe for change."

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