



Getting to Zero Means Rethinking Everything

By Leanna Nelson

It can easily be argued that no other state agency impacts the lives of New Jersey residents and visitors more than NJDOT. Our work is seen and used every day, by every single person, whether they realize it or not. Now, a bold new challenge has been set, and our collective efforts will be life changing.

Earlier this year, Governor Phil Murphy signed legislation creating the Target Zero Commission with the goal of eliminating traffic deaths and serious injuries in New Jersey by 2040. Chaired by Commissioner Fran O'Connor, this group is tasked with developing the Target Zero Action Plan – a roadmap to achieving zero roadway fatalities – and delivering it to the state legislature within one year.

With no time to waste, leaders, policy makers, and advocates gathered at the Getting to Zero Conference on February 10 in New Brunswick.

Setting the Stage for Change

At this half-day event, Governor Murphy and Commissioner O'Connor spoke about the urgency of reaching zero traffic deaths and the steps needed to get there. Panelists from NJDOT and partner agencies led discussions on the Safe System Approach (SSA), private and public sector collaboration, and advocacy involvement.



Commissioner O'Connor kicked off the event with a powerful call to action. "Too many lives have been lost, too many families forever changed by preventable tragedies," he said. "This is about more than just policies or programs – it's about people. And it's our responsibility to make sure that no one has to fear for their life just trying to get where they're going."

The morning's first session, New Jersey's Safety Landscape: The Road to Zero, featured a presentation by NJDOT's Frank Neary, Director of the Division of Safety Programs and Transportation Data. Neary highlighted current crash statistics while offering a stark reminder that, "every single number ... represents an empty chair at a holiday dinner table, missed life experiences with loved ones, and even missed seemingly routine daily experiences that some take for granted."

He went on to explain how getting to zero will require a different approach to roadway safety. "While we have been working hard for the last 60 years or so to save lives, to get to the next level we will have to shift our thinking."

Bringing the Safe System Approach to Life

The panel, How We Get to Zero: Adoption of SSA by Public Agencies, brought together experts to discuss how public agencies are integrating the SSA, as well as share insights and current initiatives.



NJDOT's Daniel LiSanti, Deputy Director of the Division of Safety Programs and Transportation Data, provided an overview of the SSA and stressed the importance of

fostering alignment as Target Zero moves forward. "Safety must come first. It's not just a goal – it's a fundamental commitment we must live by every day," he said. "To make this vision a reality, we need to fully embrace and believe in the SSA safety principles and elements as our lifesaving philosophies."

NJDOT's Jeevanjot Singh, Section Chief of Engineering, along with Michael Rizol, Director of the New Jersey Department of Highway Traffic Safety, offered a more in-depth look at the SSA's five safety elements: Safer People, Safer Vehicles, Safer Speeds, Safer Roads, and Post-Crash Care.



Governor Murphy's Commitment to Safety

Midway through the conference, Governor Murphy took the stage to reaffirm his administration's commitment to eliminating roadway fatalities.

"We're not here to talk about what could be done. We're here to commit to what must be done," he said. "That's why we created the Target Zero Commission – to bring together experts, lawmakers, and transportation leaders to develop a real plan, with real accountability, to make sure we reach zero deaths by 2040."



Murphy also highlighted recent pedestrian safety improvements deployed by NJDOT, including the successful redesign of the Route 129 and Lalor Street intersection in Trenton and new enhancements at the Route 1&9 and East Jersey Street intersection in Elizabeth. He emphasized that these aren't just one-off projects – they're part of a broader strategy to create safer roads across the entire state.



Advocate and Private Sector Collaboration

How We Get to Zero: Collaboration is the Key (Advocacy Groups) brought a different perspective to the table. Speakers from the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, the Nikhil Badlani Foundation, and the NJ Bike & Walk Coalition discussed how community-led initiatives and advocacy efforts are driving real change. This session reminded everyone in the room that public input isn't just valuable – it's essential.

How We Get to Zero: Collaboration is the Key (Private Sector) featured experts from AAA, the Brain Injury Alliance of NJ, and EZ Ride to discuss how new technologies and private-sector partnerships can help advance safety goals.



Turning Talk into Action

Finally, NJDOT's Eric Powers, Assistant Commissioner of Statewide Planning, Safety, and Capital Investment, closed the conference by putting the scale of the task ahead into perspective. In New Jersey, getting to zero will mean getting through 365 days with not one fatal incident or serious injury, with over 78 billion vehicle miles traveled each year on our more than 39,000 miles of public roadways. "As hard as that may be, the lives of our friends, family, and fellow citizens are worth it," he said.



At the end of the day, achieving zero roadway deaths isn't just the job of a few people at NJDOT – it's something we all have a hand in. This isn't just a goal. It's a commitment. Together, we will make it happen – because one death is too many.