

Bicycle Infrastructure in Las Vegas



A “Thought Experiment”

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Volume 3, Number 2

Fall 2020

DOI: [10.48413/ppj.3.2-04](https://doi.org/10.48413/ppj.3.2-04)

Abstract

Despite the increasing popularity of bicycling in the Las Vegas area, it remains dangerous. Several injuries and fatalities in recent years demonstrate this point. By aiming to improve the situation, the local transportation authority wants to promote safe bicycle ridership and culture, yielding numerous positive outcomes for several groups of stakeholders. To help bolster such efforts, we examine many of the ethical dimensions involved in this situation and invite readers to explore an imaginative “thought experiment.” This exercise proposes the idea of building an elevated bicycle path along the world-famous Las Vegas Strip to bolster the region’s micro-mobility goals.

1. Introduction

On March 19, 2018, the local paper in Las Vegas reported the death of a twenty-two-year old bicyclist near the Las Vegas Strip.¹ Ironically, that very same issue of the paper features another article warning bicyclists about the illegality of riding bicycles on the Strip’s sidewalks.² Nevertheless, this article also mentions that there are no plans on the part of the transportation department to construct bicycle lanes along that iconic stretch of roadway.³ The juxtaposition of these two articles in the same issue is jarring, to say the least. Clearly, something needs to be done.

The good news is that the transportation authority in the Las Vegas Valley, the Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada (RTC), wants to improve bicycle infrastructure to promote bicycle culture.⁴ With a new

fleet of bicycle and electric bike rentals around town, they are taking bold steps towards changing mobility culture in the metropolitan area, even giving away free helmets.⁵ Moreover, Las Vegas’ national reputation for cycling is gaining momentum.⁶ Increasing the visibility of cycling in Las Vegas’ nightlife and cityscape can bolster these recent efforts.

One obvious way to bring bicycling to the Strip area is to install a strategically elevated bicycle pathway, which would have numerous benefits beyond safety. For example, it could be raised to emphasize special vantage points of the Strip and its environs (e.g., the Bellagio fountains), or where it is desirable to carry it over intersections, as in the current pedestrian walkways. The elevation could be much more minimal in other places, thereby promoting access and reducing construction expense. Most importantly, a raised path would provide a clear separation between the roadway and the cycle path. As an additional bonus, the separation of the street and the cycle path can be constructed to discourage walking between blocks, thereby addressing another pressing safety concern along the tourist corridor. While such a project would be an economic boon

1. Rio Lacanlale, “Bicyclist, 22, Dies in Crash with Truck near Las Vegas Strip,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/local/local-las-vegas/bicyclist-22-dies-in-crash-with-truck-near-las-vegas-strip/>.

2. Art Marroquin, “Don’t Ride Your Bike on the Sidewalk, Even on Las Vegas Strip,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/news-columns/road-warrior/dont-ride-your-bike-on-the-sidewalk-even-on-las-vegas-strip/>.

3. Art Marroquin, “Don’t Ride Your Bike on the Sidewalk, Even on Las Vegas Strip,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/news-columns/road-warrior/dont-ride-your-bike-on-the-sidewalk-even-on-las-vegas-strip/>.

4. “Cycling,” *Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada*, <https://www.rtcsnv.com/ways-to-travel/cycling/>.

5. Alexandra De Leon, “RTC Debuts New Electric Bikes,” *Fox 5 Vegas*, September 12, 2019, https://www.fox5vegas.com/news/local/rtc-debuts-new-electric-bikes/article_b97969ba-d57e-11e9-9108-170d55c38720.html.

6. Geoff Carter, “Las Vegas’ Cycling Reputation Takes a Step Up,” *The Las Vegas Sun News*, June 30, 2018, <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2018/jun/30/las-vegas-cycling-reputation-takes-a-step-up/>.

for the region, we hold that it also has ethical dimensions, which we explore in this article.

We begin by making our case for the project by examining the current transportation reality in the Las Vegas metropolitan environment, focusing on bicycle infrastructure. We evaluate its strengths and the areas that could improve by conducting a “complex moral assessment” of the outcomes that an improved bicycle infrastructure could help produce. After making this determination, we explain how an elevated bicycle path will produce better outcomes. In closing, we identify a few areas of interest that researchers could investigate to improve bicycling in the Las Vegas valley.

2. The Moral Case for Bicycling

Our transportation infrastructure is a complex system with various outcomes for many different people in society and other nonhuman stakeholders. In the context of this complex sociopolitical arrangement, a “complex moral assessment” is an inventory of the several effects upon individuals and groups that aims to gauge the good or bad outcomes that a technology helps produce.⁷ These groups are the relevant stakeholders (including vulnerable and marginalized populations), the public, ecosystems and or nonhuman animals, and public artifacts (e.g., historic neighborhoods, buildings, or any other human-produced items).⁸ The idea is that all of these entities deserve consideration in terms of how they are affected by an arrangement of social and physical structures.

The order of the list above must be respected in most instances, yet it is not absolute. It needs to remain flexible, as each case will involve fluctuating conditions and different stakeholder groups. The actions behind such decisions reflect on how we morally prioritize who or what receives benefits, harms, or protections. Such an idea means that we should act to produce better outcomes for vulnerable people before improving the conditions for a nonhuman ani-

7. For a detailed account for complex moral assessment and urban affairs, see Shane Epting, “On Moral Prioritization in Environmental Ethics: Weak Anthropocentrism for the City,” *Environmental Ethics* 39, no. 2 (2017): 131-46.

8. Shane Epting, “On Moral Prioritization in Environmental Ethics: Weak Anthropocentrism for the City,” *Environmental Ethics* 39, no. 2 (2017): 131-46.

mal. For cases involving potentially tragic consequences for bicyclists, it makes sense that considerations for these stakeholders’ come first, even though nonhuman considerations exist as relevant aspects that intersect with transportation affairs.

Of course, outside of this context, there could be cases where a lower-ordered entity should receive greater consideration than a higher-ordered entity, suggesting that it is best to determine such instances on a case-by-case basis. In general, the goal is to produce better outcomes for all the groups or come as close as possible while respecting the order above. While a complex moral assessment for planning purposes would be overly detailed, we provide a rough sketch of one to give the public an idea of how morally assessing an elevated bicycle path would benefit locals and tourists alike. Such an evaluation will address the areas above, and it starts with examining the activity in question: bicycling.

Consider, for example, that bicycling safely is an inherently good activity. In turn, there are plenty of strong reasons to promote it, even in and around as heavily a trafficked area as the Las Vegas Strip. Bicycles are generally affordable, far more so than personal motorized vehicles. Some models are available for less than one hundred dollars. Bicycling can be an affordable way to travel across the city, and it can be fun. A healthy activity for the cyclist, physically and mentally, bicycling is also linked to better health outcomes, such as reducing rates of obesity, diabetes, and depression. As a form of exercise, bicycling meets the recommended intensity levels for health, combating disease, and promoting a healthy lifestyle. During the recent pandemic, bicycling gained popularity as a safe way to get outdoors while social distancing.⁹

The benefits of bicycling, however, extend beyond the individual cyclist. By removing cars from the road, bicycling reduces vehicular carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions, promoting the health of both the general population in the valley and the overall environment. Bearing in mind that the Environmental

9. Omar Villafranca, “Americans Turn to Cycling during the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *CBS Evening News*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/americans-turn-to-cycling-coronavirus-pandemic-2020-05-20/>.

Protection Agency shows that the region is one of fifty-one areas in twenty-two states that exceed federal standards for smog, this point requires attention.¹⁰ By reducing the number of cars on local roadways, we would decrease the demand for additional lanes of traffic, efforts that could lessen the rate of urban sprawl, which would displace native species of flora and fauna. Viewed on a grand scale, supporting an elevated bicycle path locally would be a modest step toward combatting climate change globally. In turn, looking at bicycling infrastructure through a lens of complex moral assessment shows that improving it could benefit all relevant stakeholders, if implemented correctly. Even though encouraging bicycling is by no means a “silver-bullet” solution to the transportation-related problems in the Las Vegas valley, it is a supportive step in the right direction.

Additionally, the Las Vegas strip is notoriously congested. Efforts to reduce the number of vehicles on this particular stretch of road would improve travel, tourism, and the overall experience of the Strip. Thus, it is in the interest of tourists and resort operators alike to provide means other than private vehicles for bringing resort employees safely to work. Despite urban legends, casino employees do not live in the hotels. With space on the Strip at a premium, resort operators have to shoulder the burden of providing space in parking garages for their employees. By developing enhanced bicycle infrastructure, we can help decrease this demand, which would address several concerns mentioned above. This point holds significance because the sheer magnitude of the resort corridor makes commuting by foot infeasible.

While Las Vegas currently has over 1,000 miles of bicycle paths, that is not a large number when you consider the metropolitan region's sprawling nature.¹¹ Many of these miles are

outside the urban core and iconic corridor. To increase ridership in the main areas of need, we need to find and address its shortcomings, and the Strip is a prime opportunity. Along with this area, downtown Las Vegas is another popular tourist attraction and place of work. It also prohibits bicycling on sidewalks, suggesting that bicycle travel is just as unsafe downtown as it is in areas around the Strip. In short, there are several reasons why we ought to promote bicycle culture in the valley. Yet, undertaking this task requires that we address a few inadequacies, and the section below does just that.

3. The Inadequacy of the Status Quo

Despite the good reasons for promoting bicycling among Las Vegas' residents, the current state of the transportation infrastructure provides a disincentive for cycling. Cycling in and around the Strip is just not safe, a fact sadly illustrated by the accident described in the first article mentioned in our introduction. At the same time, the second article reminds readers that even though there are no bicycle lanes along the Strip, cyclists are actively prohibited from bicycling along pedestrian sidewalks.

We think this presents a potentially morally challenging situation for urban planners and decision-makers. For not only is it reasonable to expect those who play such roles to promote ethically (and economically and environmentally) defensible behavior in residents, it is even more imperative for such persons *not* to set up situations and infrastructure that serve to *discourage* such behavior. That is not to say that urban planners and decision-makers have a responsibility to task residents and other stakeholders with choosing technologies that support better outcomes. We are not demanding that residents think of their actions as particularly ethical or unethical. Instead, we are merely suggesting that their urban environment should be configured as much as possible so that ethical behavior comes easily.¹²

10. Henry Brean, “Las Vegas Valley in Violation of New Federal Limits on Smog,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/local/local-las-vegas/las-vegas-valley-in-violation-of-new-federal-limits-on-smog/>.

11. For example, the Las Vegas Valley is 600 square miles. “Geography,” University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2020, <https://cber.unlv.edu/SNBDI/geography.html>. New York City is 302.64 square miles. United States Census Bureau, “QuickFacts New York city, New York,” <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/newyorkcitynewyork/PST045219>. New York City has 1348 miles of bike lanes. James Baron,

“The People of Central Park West Want Their Parking Spaces (Sorry, Cyclists),” *New York Times*, August 18, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/18/nyregion/cars-cyclists-bike-lanes-.html>.

12. It is worth mentioning that in Copenhagen, over 40 percent of trips to work or school are made on bicycles, which the majority of people view as safe and efficient.

Transportation infrastructure is a prime example of how our urban environment has been shaped to favor some choices over others. Sidewalks (and the placement thereof) clearly influence our decision whether to walk (as well as which routes to take). The choices we favor in our planning decisions thereby reflect what we hold dear. In turn, our cities have numerous artifacts that remain harmful towards humans and the nonhuman world. Like other cultural artifacts, transportation infrastructure embodies values, from the social to the environmental. While it may not make sense to say that pieces of infrastructure are, strictly speaking, “moral or immoral,” we can say that they play moral roles. To understand these roles, we must remember all the ways transportation technologies affect our lives. If we consider this point seriously, we must accept that transportation technologies that lead to pedestrian deaths, poor public health outcomes, and environmental degradation are ethically indefensible, especially if ethically preferable alternatives are available.

The history of urban design makes this point evident. Consider, for example, the (in)famous case of Robert Moses’s bridges that kept African Americans from visiting beaches that white people frequent. Although we must consider these bridges as they appear in the larger, more complex transportation network, the moral role that they play shows that they lead to ethically indefensible outcomes. Results such as these are inherently discriminatory, a status that contemporary moral planners should want to avoid. To forestall such consequences, planners need to avoid modes of thinking that follow this pattern, aiming to employ designs and technologies that achieve morally acceptable outcomes. To be clear, this could also include the *absence* of a technology. A missing stop sign at a busy intersection is a simple instance of this. When planners recognize that a situation is harmful, wherein a technology (or its lack) is playing a bad moral role, the right thing to do is to take action to achieve better outcomes.

The case of Las Vegas is an exemplar. The present infrastructure for cyclists has all the tell-tell signs of a bad moral outcome, and the poor

arrangement of transportation infrastructure is the reason for this failing. For instance, in a recent interview with the local ABC television affiliate, Andrew Bennett of the Office of Public Safety points out: “Unfortunately, 2019 has been a horrible year [for] bicycle fatality already. . . .We’ve experienced a 300 percent increase in bicycle fatalities from where we were this time last year.”¹³ In terms of overall pedestrian deaths in Las Vegas, there were 617 from 2010 through 2018.¹⁴ Cyclists’ deaths have had a profound impact on the cycling community, resulting in the formation of “Ghost Riders Las Vegas,” a group that memorializes cyclists who were struck by vehicles and died.¹⁵ They hold ceremonial rides and erect memorials of bicycles painted entirely white, giving them a ghost-like aesthetic.¹⁶

If we consider these bad outcomes seriously, then it is difficult to maintain that the situation should not improve. In this case, if we cannot change the law or take cars off the road, then we can build the missing infrastructure that will produce better outcomes. For the Strip, we think that a strategic elevated bike path is a key piece of the transportation-infrastructure puzzle. In the section below, we propose adding this imaginative piece of transportation infrastructure to examine the many benefits it could bring to the area.

4. A Proposal

A good way to begin to address the issues mentioned above could culminate in a landmark infrastructure project that draws attention to bicycling. A strategically elevated bike

13. Cinthia Maldonado, “Hit-and-Run Crash Nearly Kills Boy in Summerlin,” ABC 13 KTNV, March 7, 2019, <https://www.ktnv.com/news/crime/hit-and-run-nearly-kills-boy-in-summerlin>.

14. Mick Akers, “Pedestrian Deaths in Las Vegas Can Be Reduced by Staying Alert,” Las Vegas Review-Journal, April 1, 2019, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/columns/road-warrior/pedestrian-deaths-in-las-vegas-can-be-reduced-by-staying-alert-1630811/>.

15. Rio Lacanlale, “Henderson ‘Ghost Bike’ Ride, Ceremony Honor Fallen Bicyclist,” Las Vegas Review-Journal, November 4, 2017, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/local/henderson/henderson-ghost-bike-ride-ceremony-honor-fallen-bicyclist/>.

16. Rio Lacanlale, “Henderson ‘Ghost Bike’ Ride, Ceremony Honor Fallen Bicyclist,” Las Vegas Review-Journal, November 4, 2017, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/local/henderson/henderson-ghost-bike-ride-ceremony-honor-fallen-bicyclist/>.

path could do just that. If we were to customize a complex moral assessment for the Las Vegas valley, the many reasons above show that we need a solution that can serve many interests. We can assess how an elevated bicycle path can deal with the concerns that we have identified. For instance, an elevated bicycle path would separate bikes from cars, effectively removing them from areas of danger. Although it would only be an initial step towards increasing overall bicycle safety, it could count as a benchmark for progress, giving planners and decision-makers a starting point for the progress to come.

Moreover, an elevated bike path would diversify tourism, appealing to health-conscious visitors who want to enjoy the nightlife but also don't want to engage in a rendition of *The Hangover*. Considering that local economies depend on vacation seekers, expanding Sin City's appeal could bolster and diversify these efforts. Although at this point, the idea of an elevated bike path remains in the "thought experiment" stage, meaning that it lacks an architectural rendering (or even a sketch), we would like to invite your imagination to paint some of the broad strokes of what it could look like.

At present, Las Vegas has two parts of town that attract tourists and serve as hubs of employment, the Fremont Street Experience in downtown (Old Vegas) and The Strip.¹⁷ While they are nearby, they remain disconnected, and the area between (two miles, give or take) is not the safest for bicyclists or pedestrians. In between these locations, there are lesser-known attractions such as the Arts District, an area that features unique cafes, restaurants, galleries, and funky vintage shops. This bicycle path could connect the main areas, and they could provide stop-off access points for other interest points such as the Arts District. Yet, to push our imaginations even further, we could envision the bike path starting at Fremont Street, winding its way alongside the majestic Las Vegas Strip, ending at the new stadium for the Las Vegas Raiders, for a total of seven "lucky" miles, giving the project and destination a fitting name. As mentioned during the outset, it would only be elevated in strategic places, and

it would have several hop-on-hop-off points to ensure feasibility. It should also add to existing infrastructures and transport services.

Imagine that you or you and your significant other lands at McCarran Airport. A short cab ride or car-share later, you check into your hotel on the Strip or downtown. After a nice dinner and some time at the tables, you head to a concert, followed by a fun-filled night on the town. The next day, you repeat the process. However, the day after, you want to do something else, an activity that is conducive to healthy living. As the sun begins to set, you make your way to a bicycle rental shop, reserving two "Strip Cruisers," one-speed luxury bikes, complete with spill-proof cup holders, mobile device docks, and a hot-pink flamingo seat cushion. While gliding down the bike path, high above the ground, you marvel at the sunset over the Red Rock escarpment, and soon you are greeted by the warm glow of neon lights and the excitement of the Las Vegas cityscape.

Along with the pure enjoyment that could accompany an elevated bike path in Las Vegas, this critical piece of infrastructure could have numerous advantages that would help mitigate existing harms and provide numerous benefits for locals and tourists. For instance, it would provide a safe way for people to ride bicycles near the Strip without changing existing ordinances. Second, it would provide an alternative means of mobility for casino workers and locals alike. This point also shows they could easily incorporate exercise into their daily routines, which would increase efforts to improve public health in the region. In addition to these aspects, it would also, albeit rather modestly, reduce traffic and automobile emissions, which could improve air quality (slightly). Implementing this infrastructure would also increase bicycle sales and rentals, which could also bolster the local economy. The existing hotel and convention center infrastructure could easily host bicycle conventions, becoming a central place for showcasing bicycle technology and culture.

In addition to the benefits for locals, an elevated bicycle path could, of course, speak to the interests of tourists who come to Las Vegas for vacation. While driving past or walking down the Strip offers visitors with the up-close expe-

17. To see a map of the areas of interest, see Vegas Unzipped, "Las Vegas Maps – 2020 3D Strip Map," <https://www.vegasunzipped.com/las-vegas-maps/>.

rience of the city's excitement, an elevated bike path would provide them with another iconic way to appreciate the neon aesthetics from above, giving an experience that is rivaled only by the images captured by drones equipped with cameras. For families staying for a week or weekend in town, it would create an opportunity to spend time together. If the path were to include access to the Raiders' football stadium eventually, families could avoid traffic and parking costs, allowing for more money to go toward souvenirs.

For the health-conscious tourist, this bike path could complete a fun-filled, healthy weekend. Consider, for instance, that along with a vibrant nightlife scene, the region also has natural tourist attractions that offer year-long outdoor activities such as hiking, sightseeing, and rock climbing, such as Red Rock Canyon and Mt. Charleston Wilderness area, both are located right beyond the city. Including an elevated bike path would provide outdoor thrill-seekers with a variety of activities. There are already numerous delicious and healthy restaurants in the metropolitan area that would be ready for hungry tourists to replenish after a rigorous workout, high above the boulevard.

Considering that the Luxor Hotel and Casino emits a beam of light that can be seen from outer space, replicas of the Eiffel Tower, the Statue of liberty, and the Venice Canals exist on the Strip, along with thousands of species of fish and flowers, putting a two-to-seven mile strategically elevated bicycle pathway in the sky would fit right in. While the activities mentioned above could almost serve as an advertisement for a tourist attraction, some challenges would need to be addressed if one wanted to explore the possibility of moving from daydream to reality. To address these issues, the following sections examine some of the obstacles that need attention.

5. Addressing the Challenges Ahead

While we have provided several reasons for building an elevated bike path in Las Vegas, most cities have strong reasons to avoid

building them.¹⁸ For instance, one view is that street-level bike lanes provide economic benefits to local businesses. One could argue that we should apply this view to our present case. However, The Las Vegas Strip is not like most other roadways. Even if you have never been to Las Vegas, you might be familiar with this roadway, knowingly or unknowingly. The Strip and its classic hotels and casinos have appeared in well over one hundred films.

Aside from its cinematic accomplishments, The Strip has received a rare designation of an "All-American Road," signifying its importance and value. According to the United States Department of Transportation, "All-American Roads, the higher designation, provide visitors with a unique driving experience and are considered destinations unto themselves. They provide an exceptional traveling experience such that motorists go to these highways as a primary reason for their trip."¹⁹ Considering this view, coupled with the fact that the city has already dismissed the possibility of permitting bicycles on the Strip, as mentioned earlier, it is unlikely that this classic piece of Americana will be altered for travelers on two wheels. In turn, if we want to make room for bicycles on The Strip, we cannot take it to the streets.

The idea of an elevated bike path will also present additional challenges. That is, while safety, physical, and topographical difficulties will keep engineers and planners busy, other ethical considerations deserve attention. For example, how will the city of Las Vegas (and surrounding areas) acquire the land required to build it?²⁰ Who will pay for it? Must local taxpayers or tourists shoulder the economic burden that this infrastructure would create? Will socioeconomically disadvantaged people

18. For example, see Tyler Falk, "Why Your City Doesn't Need an Elevated Bicycle Highway," ZDNet, January 15, 2014, <https://www.zdnet.com/article/why-your-city-doesnt-need-an-elevated-bicycle-highway/>.

19. United States Department of Transportation. "U.S. Transportation Deputy Secretary Downey Announces New All-American Roads, National Scenic Byways in 20 States," 2000, <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/pressroom/fhwa0042.cfm>.

20. The proper "City of Las Vegas" is rather small. The surrounding metropolitan areas are usually thought of as being part of Las Vegas. For more information, see Clark County, Nevada, "2018 Clark County / Las Vegas Valley Jurisdictional Boundaries," <https://www.clarkcountynv.gov/public-communications/news/Documents/Map%20Jurisdictional%20Las%20Vegas%20Area%200218.pdf>.

be evicted from their homes? It would surely not be a good idea to exacerbate housing problems while trying to improve mobility issues—for the same people in many instances.

What's more, are there any guarantees that this piece of infrastructure will deliver the outcomes mentioned above? How is it morally acceptable to build an elevated bike path for the future, when most cyclists and pedestrians are killed away from the Strip? For example, the majority of bicycle and pedestrian-related fatalities happen outside of the tourists' sector. So, wouldn't a better use of those resources be to attend to those matters? Although these are pressing questions that deserve attention, they do not dismiss the possibility that an elevated bike path could motivate people to pay more attention to bicycling infrastructure. In turn, increasing the public appeal of the matter could draw attention to the questions above, which could lead to more socially just outcomes.²¹

6. Conclusion

This article began by addressing a serious concern: bicycle safety and the Las Vegas Strip. We highlighted the reality that while bicycle riding is not allowed on the Strip, people want to experience it on two wheels. Although these things are not compatible, introducing an elevated bike path would serve as the beginning of a solution. Beyond this scenario, adding this infrastructure to the existing mobility systems serves many more interests for locals and tourists alike. Examining these possibilities showed that there are many reasons why the county and city planners of Las Vegas should further explore this infrastructure as a viable option to support transportation, public health, environmental preservation, and urban sustainability overall. Despite these possible advantages, there are areas of concern that require attention. Yet, when stacking the pros against the cons, betting on an elevated bike path does not seem like a gamble.

21. Since the submission of this article, additional tragedies in the area have increased, increasing the urgency to have more conversations about these affairs. For more information, see Heidi Kyser, "Could a Traffic Tragedy Lead to Safer Roads for Cyclists?" KNPR's State of Nevada, January 21, 2021, <https://knpr.org/knpr/2021-01/could-traffic-tragedy-lead-safer-roads-cyclists>.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Remmon Barbaza, Joshua Morrison, and Larry Gragg for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. We would also like to thank our interdisciplinary colleagues who helped shape this project during its earliest stages: Glenn Nowak, Alex Paz, Brendan Morris, Benoy Jacob, and Rae Lathrop. We would like to thank Michigan State University, the *Public Philosophy Journal*, and the Andrew Mellon Foundation for providing the financial means to work on this paper at the Public Philosophy Journal 2018 Collaborative Writing Workshop in Hickory Corners, Michigan. Thanks to Chris Long, Andrea Walsh, Kurt Milberger, and Taylor Mills for their work.

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