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Rising death tolls dictate putting priority on safety

About the writer: Casey Kulla is a farmer, former Yamhill County commissioner and forest policy nerd with Oregon Wild. He lives on Grand Island with his family, and is committed to walking, hiking and biking whenever it's feasible to leave the car at home.

When I drive the 13 miles into McMinnville from our farm on Grand Island, I pass little white crosses on the side of the road. The same is true when I drive the 13 miles into Salem.

You've seen them, too. Some are just plain white crosses while others are decorated. Each represents a person who died along our

roads, and a family and community torn apart by as a result.

What you don't see on the roads of Yamhill County, the sidewalks of McMinnville or bike lanes of Salem is any public note of all those not memorialized in that fashion by their families.

I can count 11 fatalities on one three-mile stretch of Wallace Road just since we moved to our farm in 2006. The stretch of Highway 18 between Dayton and the Three Mile Lane Bridge access is even more dangerous, claiming 12 lives just since 2017.

The oceans of tears from these tragedies are, in fact, largely preventable. We can make our roads, streets, bike lanes, crosswalks and sidewalks substantially safer simply by prioritizing safety in our road system.

The Oregon Department of Transportation's mission statement promises, "We provide a safe and reliable multimodal transportation system that connects people and helps Oregon's communities and economy thrive." But money matters, and money has been pouring disproportionately into the "reliable" part of the equation.

The 2017 state transportation bill promised enormous new projects to keep people moving along major highways. That's not prioritizing safety.

If we truly prioritized safety, we would be logging fewer traffic fatalities each passing year. But by any measure, we're not.

The number of traffic deaths increased 73% between 2010 and 2022, and the pedestrian death count increased nearly 100%. It's so bad that in Portland, pedestrians — people out for a walk, headed to a store or workplace, or picking up the kids at school — have come to account for 40% of all fatalities.

One might wonder if all those people looking at their phones instead of the road aren't at fault here. You know, the ones you see lingering at a green light or swerving on a straight road.

But, in fact, studies show that cell phones account for only 1% of road fatalities nationally, and there's no reason for thinking it differs significantly here. Oregon studies peg excessive speed as a factor in 75% of pedestrian fatalities, making it the dominant causative element.

We have to do better, and it's not just a matter of changing personal behavior. It's also a matter of prioritizing road safety. Remember, the state provides much of the funding for local city and county projects. So a change in thinking would have the potential to affect all projects in Oregon, not just projects carried out under direct state oversight.

Next year, the Oregon Legislature is slated to enact another transportation bill — one providing direction to ODOT in addition to identifying projects and revenue sources to pay for them. I believe it needs to prioritize safety.

It seems incredible that a growing death count associated with a particular element of the system doesn't trigger a redesign. It also seems incredible that ODOT hasn't prioritized roundabouts when its own records show they reduce fatalities 90%.

ODOT planners know the treacherous merges, the disappearing bike lanes, the unsafe bridges, the blind curves. And they know how to deal with them, both for motorized and non-motorized users.

One element in that is getting vulnerable users like walker and bicyclists off the road and away from cars.

But here in Yamhill County, kids going to school still have to dodge speeding cars on state highways featuring narrow shoulders and dangerous crossings. And we all know that's the case in many other locales around the state.

Inaction isn't just putting humans at risk, either. All across Oregon, highways are a significant factor in animal deaths as well.

Carnivores, game animals and other forms of wildlife all have to cope with highways to survive, as do domestic pets and livestock in many cases. Nationally, an estimated one to two million animals die every year on our roads.

ODOT and the Department of Fish and Wildlife have started working together to build wildlife crossings, but there's bureaucratic barriers in the way of ODOT embracing wildlife crossings. Those barriers fall when ODOT leaders prioritize safety for humans and critters alike.

What's more, we're now on the tail end of a record-breaking wildfire season. While we avoided the kinds of urban firestorms we saw in 2020, we need the ability to evacuate entire communities in the face of the kind of firestorm that destroyed

Paradise, and to simultaneously ensure first responders quick, effective access the other direction in order to save what we can.

In the 2025 transportation bill, let's prioritize road safety, helping ensure we all get home from our trips. It isn't just a matter of encouraging safer behavior, it's also about ensuring highways are safe by design.

Let's do it in memory of those for whom it's too late and in consideration of those for whom there is still time. Let's commit ourselves to preventing all the deaths we can.