



L.A.'s Inter-Agency Budgeting Process: A Powerful Tool for Vision Zero

Cross-departmental collaboration is one of the necessary elements for effective Vision Zero efforts. Traffic safety is not the purview of any single department, and Vision Zero projects often demand buy-in and leadership from multiple agencies within a city structure, including Transportation, Public Works, Police, and Public Health, among others. While it's not glamorous or even visible to most of the public, one of the most important things a city can do is make sure its internal processes allow for - and even incentivize - strong cooperation between agencies to advance Vision Zero.

When it comes to budgeting, encouraging collaboration across departments isn't something that most cities are well equipped for. In 2014, the City of Los Angeles adopted a simple, yet powerful, procedural change in the way it allocates funds to different branches of city government to help foster collaboration and ensure efficient use of resources for projects that cross departmental lines. This innovation for joint departmental budget requests has helped L.A. secure resources for its Vision Zero work across the city.

Funding Vision Zero

In L.A.'s budgeting process, the Mayor's Office and Chief Administrative Office determine how money is allocated within the city budget. Traditionally, city agencies issue budget requests independent of each other, and they are evaluated in isolation based on priorities identified through political and planning processes. A hypothetical example: both the Schools Department and the Parks Department may request funds for playgrounds, but there was (until recently), no mechanism to request the money together, so that the efforts could be coordinated and mutually supportive.

The challenge with broad, multi-departmental efforts like Vision Zero is that some projects don't work if one agency gets funding for its part in a project and another doesn't. It may seem like an obvious issue in city government,

but surprisingly there were no protocols in place for joint-departmental budgeting in L.A. -- or still, in most cities -- before 2014.

Breaking Down Silos

Vision Zero was a "helpful way to get different departments together at the table to talk about traffic safety, but we needed a way to get funding behind it," said Nat Gale, the Principal Project Manager for Vision Zero in the L.A. Department of Transportation. Gale previously led L.A.'s Great Streets Initiative, working in the Mayor's Office. The first joint-departmental budget request was created under his tenure with the Great Streets Initiative. The process simply adds a cover sheet to the standard budget request protocols, and extra points are awarded for demonstrating that one agency's project leverages funds to another.



Photo credit LA Vision Zero

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Joint departmental budgeting isn't just allowed, it's incentivized. Joint department requests are more favorably reviewed by the budget committee, and have resulted in more funding being available for L.A.'s early Vision Zero efforts than would have been likely under the traditional process.

The city's Vision Zero program officially launched in August 2015 with an executive order from Mayor Eric Garcetti, in part to coincide with the city's budget cycle. Gale credits the timing with helping to generate early momentum behind Vision Zero. "Syncing up launch of the Vision Zero initiative with the budget cycle makes sense," he said. Being able to go quickly from the initial announcement into offering resources to do the work helped create an "early win" that helped demonstrate to city insiders and the public that they were serious about Vision Zero "(Joint departmental budgeting) is one of those things that helps break down silos," said Gale.

A Simple, Common Sense Solution

Much of the behind-the-scenes work to implement a Vision Zero program is challenging and complex. This includes changing long-standing institutional and cultural attitudes toward traffic safety, sustaining political leadership and momentum, and coordinating efforts across multiple agencies and partners in a complex city bureaucracy; none of these critical tasks has a simple path to success.

While it's not necessarily an easy win, identifying and solving relatively straightforward procedural problems — like incentivizing efficient joint-departmental budgeting — can lay the foundation for a successful and sustained Vision Zero effort. As simple as it sounds, creating incentives for cross-department work — and funding it — is one early and powerful step that every city can take as it commits to eliminating traffic deaths and serious injuries.

Learn more at visionzeronetwork.org.