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RESOURCE

Promoting Resident Safety in a Commuter Corridor: Mount Rainier's SS4A Award

With support from the Local Infrastructure Hub, Mount Rainier, Maryland is making significant investments in road safety for the benefit of residents and commuters traveling through the city, serving as a model and inspiration for other cities seeking to invest in road safety. After participating in a Local Infrastructure Hub bootcamp about the Safe Streets for All (SS4A) grant program, Mount Rainier applied for and, in December 2023, received a \$9.8 million SS4A Implementation Grant, funding the city's implementation of their Vision Zero Action Plan.



Mount Rainier is a city on the border of Washington, D.C., serving as Maryland's gateway to the district. With a population of just over 8,000 residents in a 0.65 square mile area, it is the state's most densely populated city. The city's approved FY 2025 operating budget was \$9.7 million (~\$100,000 less than their SS4A grant). The city has been historically limited in their ability to make system-wide investments in transportation safety due to budget constraints.

This resource details how Mount Rainier won the grant and how they are leveraging it to implement a range of innovative strategies to improve roadway safety — strategies that other cities can replicate both with and without funding from federal programs.

Starting the Path to Vision Zero

Prior to organizing around the Safe Streets for All funding opportunity, Mount Rainier typically incorporated investments and work in transportation safety through their regular capital improvements plan, which was typically limited to only 5% of their annual budget. But the funding made available by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act empowered the city to think bigger, beyond their historic budget constraints and on a system-wide scale.

In March 2023, Mount Rainier's City Council [adopted a resolution](#) to formally establish their Safe Streets Task Force and direct the creation of a Vision Zero Action Plan. The Council's resolution was motivated by the opportunities presented in the Safe Streets for All Program. The demonstration of support from the city's elected officials empowered local stakeholders who were on the task force to organize, engage, and plan based on a shared vision for transportation safety.

The task force created by the resolution included a cross-departmental group of city staff members, including the City Manager, Chief of Policy, and the Public Works Director as well as representatives from City Council, the city's green team, the city's tree commission, and two additional volunteers appointed by the council. Additionally, the resolution provided explicit direction for the task force to secure participation from representatives from the city's two schools, the Maryland State Highway Administration, and Prince George's County Department of Transportation.

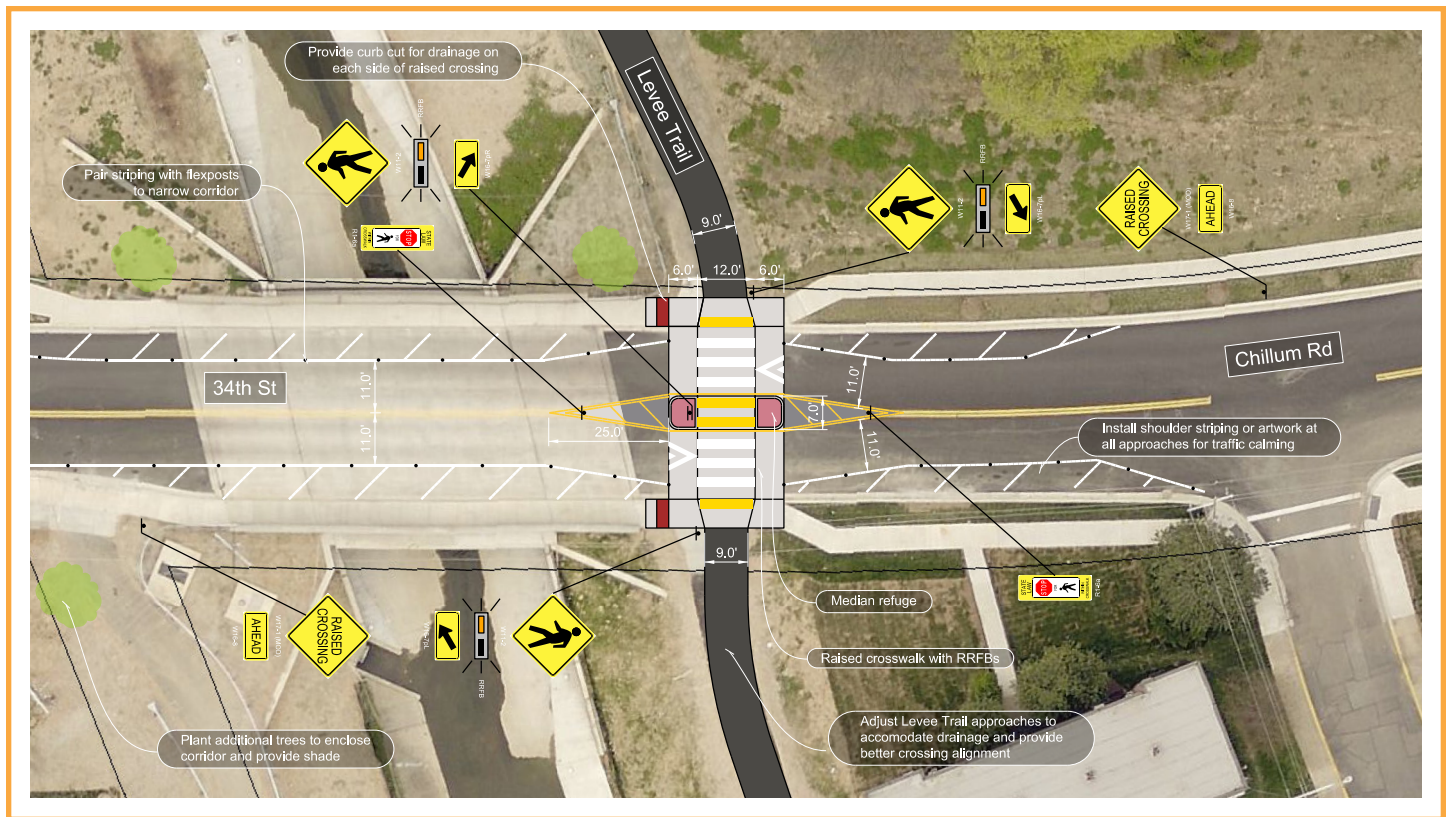
During their Vision Zero planning and engagement process, the city and task force held multiple public meetings; conducted focus groups with walking and biking advocates, local residents, representatives from the schools and parent teacher organizations, and the city’s tree commission; and held three full task force meetings.

In collaboration with Toole Design, an engineering consultant brought in to support this effort, the City [approved and published](#) their [Vision Zero Action Plan](#) in June 2023. The Vision Zero Action Plan helped to define transportation challenges, identify the high-injury network, and laid out strategies and interventions that could be used.

Unique Transportation Safety Challenges

The City of Mount Rainier faces many unique transportation safety challenges that are specified in their Vision Zero Action Plan, and the plan provides the quantitative and qualitative background to inform the city’s traffic safety interventions.

In Mount Rainier, 1 in 5 of the city’s 8,000 residents do not have access to a car, yet their average daily traffic surpasses 20,000 cars, trucks, and SUVs – more than double the population. This data point is indicative of the fact that the majority of the city’s traffic is from commuters and other travelers, rather than local residents. Relatedly, a prominent concern within the community is ‘cut through traffic’ — particularly commuters speeding through residential streets in the city as a shortcut between arterial roads.



Mount Rainier’s Vision Zero Action Plan notes that actions and developments in nearby municipalities like Brentwood, Hyattsville, Bladensburg, and Washington D.C., impact how residents travel within and through Mount Rainier. The city must work with its neighboring communities and regional partners to ensure safety and consistency in traffic behaviors on the roads leading to and through the city to support shared safety goals. As Mount Rainier Mayor Celina Benitez said, “this is [Mount Rainier’s] border, not our bubble.”

In their grant application, Mount Rainier leveraged data to demonstrate the impact of traffic behaviors and design — showing that from 2017 – 2021 there were 785 reported crashes involving 1,600 people, of which 21 crashes resulted in serious injuries — 45% of those seriously injured in these crashes were pedestrians.

Per their grant application, based on this crash data from 2017 – 2021, Mount Rainier sees the equivalent of 197 crashes per 1,000 people. For reference, the whole state of Maryland sees [20.7 accidents per 1,000 people](#); and, of the fifty largest cities in the U.S., Portland, Oregon's drivers have the most crashes with [7.46 accidents per 1,000 people](#).

Within Mount Rainier's [Vision Zero Action Plan](#), a survey respondent describes their difficulty to safely walk to and access the community's closest Metro Rail station, West Hyattsville: "That station is SO CLOSE to our city (huge asset) but it seems so far away because Queens Chapel is so hostile to pedestrians and the bike route... is not direct"

A prime consideration for the city and the task force has been ensuring the safety of their school age children and accessibility to the community's two elementary schools. Their Safe Streets and Roads for All grant application outlines the city's need to provide school bus service solely for the fact that crossing Rhode Island Avenue, a main arterial roadway for accessing D.C. and a designated state highway, is too dangerous for school children to regularly cross.

Historically, Mount Rainier has been significantly constrained in their ability to make complex and comprehensive transportation safety improvements given their limited tax base; external funding support is critical to enabling Mount Rainier to implement transportation safety interventions.

Thanks to the local transportation safety planning work of the city and task force, Mount Rainier was able to organize and move quickly in 2023 to create a comprehensive plan and apply for funding that is now enabling them to make system-wide investments to advance transportation safety.

Safety Interventions

The city is implementing a wide array of interventions to improve safety in and around the city. Ongoing improvements include:

Intersection daylighting — the city is installing curb extensions and implementing parking restrictions to make pedestrians at corners more visible to drivers and vice versa.

Installing high-visibility crosswalks — the city is installing [high-visibility crosswalks](#) at all pedestrian crossing locations on their high-injury network, as identified in their vision zero action plans, as well as all locations where there have been fatal or serious injury pedestrian crashes

Implement gateway safety treatments — The city will install gateway treatments to mark transitions away from higher-speed environments to lower-speed areas and signal to drivers that they should slow down and expect to see more people outside of cars, particularly people walking. Gateways may combine a variety of different treatments, including curb extensions, speed limit signage, landscaping and placemaking elements, and changes in pavement color and/or texture.

Develop and implement a sidewalk maintenance and lighting improvement fund — The city is adopting a proactive sidewalk repair and replacement policy that divides the city up into sidewalk repair zones and ensures that all sidewalks in each zone are inspected and repaired at least once every 10 years. The City of Mount Rainier will also review its policies and procedures for removal of snow, debris, and overhanging vegetation from sidewalks to determine if these policies need to be updated to improve traffic safety or pedestrian access. The City will also conduct an outreach campaign to inform property owners of their sidewalk maintenance responsibilities, including how they relate to the City's vision zero goals.

Driver safety education campaign — The city will implement a driver safety education campaign to supplement the regional Street Smart Program with a local driver safety education campaign focused on high-risk driver groups and crash hot spots on the high injury network.

Safety modifications for the city's fleet — Mount Rainier, using funding from the grant, purchased and installed side-underrun guards on large, city-owned trucks to prevent pedestrians and other vulnerable road users from falling between the wheels of a large vehicle during a collision. You can find an example of side-underrun guards via [USDOT's Vople Center](#).

Annual Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Program expansion/investment — Thomas S. Stone and Mount Rainier Elementary School currently participate in some SRTS activities, like Walk & Roll to School Day in the fall and Bike & Roll to School Day in the spring. The City of Mount Rainier will work with the schools and other local partners to expand these programs to incorporate additional activities to promote traffic safety, such as pedestrian and bicyclist safety and skills education, support for walking school buses and bike trains, annual outreach to parents on safe driving near schools and arrival and dismissal procedures, and annual observations of arrival and dismissal and audit of student walking and bicycling routes. They will also conduct regular surveys of parents and caregivers to identify safety concerns, understand barriers to walking and bicycling to school, and track the impact of program implementation.

Adapting to Administration Shifts

The 2024 general election and subsequent Presidential transition saw the United States Department of Transportation's leadership pivot focal areas and priorities for many of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act's discretionary grant programs. During this time, many communities with grant applications under review or who had not yet signed a grant agreement for an awarded project faced uncertainty on their project's future.

Mayor Benitez has discussed how Mount Rainier worked to maintain their funding by taking a few critical steps. First, as their implementation efforts started prior to the administration transition, Mount Rainier was able to show that they developed a vision and were carrying it forward; they were not just completing studies and archiving them, but rather doing the work in real time to implement the findings and recommendations from prior planning activities.

Second, they acted quickly to adapt to new policy language, focusing on the transportation safety benefits of their grant application. Mount Rainier was also able to demonstrate the higher return on investment by highlighting that improvements in road safety and sidewalk maintenance will improve business and support local economic activity.

Third, they made sure that they were constantly engaged both with their federal grant manager and contractors to make sure all relevant parties were communicating on the project's reimbursement cycle and regularly updating implementation progress, while contractors understood next steps in accordance with grant dollars.

Conclusion

Mount Rainier's success in getting and leveraging a SS4A Implementation Grant provides insight to communities looking to pursue and leverage future funding opportunities both in the SS4A program and for other transportation safety projects — no matter the size of your city.

First, local leaders must cast a wide, but thoughtful, net in their community engagement to ensure that key stakeholders are at the table. This includes local residents, school leadership, and representatives from anchor institutions as well as from relevant city departments. Mayor Benitez discussed how engagement with utility companies and others that may be working in the City's rights-of-way should be engaged to support **"Dig Once"** efforts and align construction timelines. Similarly, the city and project managers must maintain constant communication throughout the project lifecycle to highlight opportunities to provide feedback, successes, and both short- and long-term construction impacts.

Second, especially for smaller communities, local leaders should coordinate with overlapping and neighboring jurisdictions to ensure that investments complement one another, especially when they have a shared goal. Mayor Benitez noted that working with the state, county, neighboring communities, and stakeholders from D.C. helped to raise awareness for the investment needs and behavioral changes, particularly those around gateways to the community.

As Mayor Benitez said on a recent Local Infrastructure Hub webinar, "being able to get this infrastructure money meant [we] were big players." The City of Mount Rainier can now use their successful implementation story in pursuit of other funding opportunities. The residents and commuters are both safer thanks to this grant, and the City has demonstrated capacity to manage large awards. City leaders are already starting to lay the groundwork for future investments that build upon this success.