Summary of Conclusions

At the Kinder Institute for Urban Research and LINK Houston’s 2018 Street Safety Summit, a diverse group of people gathered to discuss safety and accessibility for all people using Houston’s streets. The event offered participants the opportunity to learn about and discuss strategies to better our city’s streets by advocating for physical improvements and policy changes, especially for people rolling, walking, and biking.

This summary of conclusions outlines best practices to improve advocacy around street safety for Houstonians. Each idea is based on information presented by local and national speakers during the Summit, data analyses from participating organizations, and participant working group discussions. The list is intended to empower people – current and future advocates; neighbor and neighborhood leader; non-profit stakeholder and business owner; as well as elected officials and government staff – working toward safer streets for all people in Houston.

Key Shared Priority

Value people. People should be the focus of every policy, design, engineering solution, education program, law enforcement effort, and public engagement initiative to make city streets safer and more accessible. To put people first, we must use language that emphasizes people as the subject. We, as individuals, can contribute to a cultural shift that values safety for all road users by how we conduct ourselves in the streets and treat fellow road users.

Takeaways for Advocates, Community Stakeholders, and Residents

Communicate with clear, people-focused language. Most people interested in safer streets are not technical experts. Language that keeps people at the forefront can connect with a broader audience. Communications efforts can also help to educate journalists on the need to value people in their writing by replacing “accident” with “crash” or “pedestrian” with “person walking.”

Share stories through an organized campaign. Narratives from people who walk and bike can complement data and make it easier to communicate why safety and accessibility improvements are necessary. Sharing stories through a campaign focused on a cohesive message can be highly effective, such as #saferstreetshtx.

Get organized. Getting people organized to collectively call for safer streets is key. Organize around shared interests and through a variety of means. Consider starting small chapters in neighborhoods, rather than solely citywide groups, so that residents can easily invest in an effort. Advocates can help communities organize to move from ideas to projects.

Evaluate Progress

Measure progress toward building safer streets. The city is now annually reporting on new and improved bikeways. Similarly quantifying existing sidewalks and tracking additions and improvements to the pedestrian network will help residents see local progress.

Develop goals to reduce crashes. Advocates can collaborate with elected leaders to develop pragmatic, incremental goals to reduce the number of fatal or serious crashes involving people walking and biking.

Collect data on near misses and problem spots. A formal way to track near-miss crashes and problem areas on city streets and a new category to report issues with infrastructure for people walking and biking on 311 could help to provide needed information on dangerous locations. Special attention should be paid to problem areas near new bike and pedestrian improvements to ensure they are successfully creating a safer environment.
Takeaways for Elected and Agency Leaders

Design and engineer for the most vulnerable people. Street designs, signals, lighting and engineering should work for people regardless of age, size, ability, or mode of transportation.

Diversify the source of ideas. Individuals with different expertise and experiences can bring forward new ideas to change how we solve safety and accessibility problems. Place urban planners on teams with engineers. Look at other cities in the United States or abroad for ideas.

Connect people to destinations. Putting people first in our street design means ensuring safe access to a variety of destinations. Streets, sidewalks, bikeways, trails, and paths should be developed as a network, so people can safely and efficiently choose when and how they travel to the places they need to go.

Never say never to retrofitting sprawl. Low-density places such as populated areas can become safer for people rolling, walking, and biking. For example, Tysons Corner, Virginia is a suburban area outside of Washington, DC where private and public sector stakeholders have successfully partnered to connect the once sprawling, car-centric business district internally and to communities with a series of green spaces, sidewalks, bikeways, and transit.

Look for “good bones.” Existing infrastructure and natural elements like bayous can be a good starting point for walking and biking improvements. Reviving older buildings or walkable areas can also create a sense of place, restore history, and reinvigorate areas that were originally created for people to interact with each other on the street.

Promote density but work to slow displacement. Find the tool or tools to promote the type of density that fits your community. Federal low-income housing credits, tax-increment financing, or affordable housing set-asides are options to bring greater density, but these tools should be paired with policies and programs to enable residents to stay in communities they choose.

Educate all people using the streets. Information about how to be safe while rolling, walking, or riding, as well as how to recognize and be safe around other road users should be available to all residents. Trainings, awareness campaigns, interactive courses in schools, and integration into driver’s education could expand opportunities to learn about street safety.

Prioritize safety and accessibility. Law enforcement should focus on protecting the rights of every person using the streets, regardless of their mode of transportation. Law enforcement officers, urban planners, and engineers can partner to change our street safety culture through policy, design, and enforcement.

Prioritize housing near transit. Housing and transportation are both essential ingredients to an affordable standard-of-living with access to opportunity. One way to reduce transportation cost is to place affordable housing with accessible sidewalks and bikeways near high quality transit. The Housing + Transportation Affordability Index shows Houstonians spend about 25 percent of their income on housing and another 20 percent on transportation.