

Traffic advocates say Vision Zero action plan goes light on alcohol

Written by Alex McLoon

OMAHA, Neb. — Omaha has a plan to curb traffic deaths with the Vision Zero action plan. But advocates behind the plan say it goes light on alcohol.

Advocates like Project Extra Mile and Safe Omaha Streets partnered with city officials and other experts to deliver the multi-step plan to protect people on city streets. The plan adopted by city council Tuesday has two strategies to prevent alcohol-related crashes: increasing enforcement and addressing addiction.

"We're actually the second worst self-reported DUI state in the country, and we're about double the national average," said Chris Wagner, executive director of Project Extra Mile.

Wagner says Omaha is one of the worst binge-drinking cities. Crashes involving drugs or alcohol killed 116 people here over the past nine years — seven of them just this year.

Omaha City Council approved the Vision Zero action plan Tuesday. The plan suggests increasing enforcement through the criminal justice system, like specialized courts and training for police and prosecutors. The plan suggests addressing addiction through educational campaigns and outreach efforts. Advocates say the initiative should also prevent overserving, increase the price of alcohol, and reduce the legal limit.

"The adoption of this Vision Zero action plan does not solve all our problems. We have a consistently dangerous culture of driving on Omaha streets," said Triletty Wade of Safe Omaha Streets.

Project Extra Mile also points to success in Maryland. The state increased alcohol sales tax by 3 percent. A 2017 study says that reduced crashes involving alcohol-positive drivers ages 15 to 34 by 12 percent, who were sensitive to price tags.

"I know it's a challenging strategy but it really does work," Wagner said.

"We're looking to work with the city to implement strategies like that that are proven successful in other states and other countries to really get to those zero traffic fatalities," he said.

Mayor Jean Stothert says Vision Zero is a plan updated every five years.