The city’s new Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan, recently released to the public, offers to improve safety for drivers, cyclists and walkers throughout La Crosse. With the planning stage complete, now is the time for the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, the city and the public to work together to support funding this vision.

Our original goal for this column was to show the economic and environmental benefits of the plan.

The plan impacts the entire city and region: improving access to businesses, promoting healthy living, and offering recreation opportunities and amenities that make the city more attractive to potential employers. These amenities help all of La Crosse recruit and retain employees in the growing fields of high tech, higher education and health care.

While those goals are still important, it’s obvious that recent traffic accidents require a change in focus. In the past several weeks, multiple incidents have resulted in two fatalities of pedestrians, one a UW-L student. These tragedies have reminded us that promoting safety should be a primary concern.

The most important goal of traffic design is preventing avoidable accidents, and this plan encourages bikers and walkers to interface with traffic in more predictable ways. Bike lanes and signs tend to make cyclists behave more responsibly; well marked and thoughtfully constructed pedestrian crossings keep both walkers and drivers safe.

The challenge is obvious near UW-L. Students walk and bike in large numbers, even across busy streets such as West Avenue. First-year students are discouraged from bringing cars to campus, and many continue their collegiate career without automobiles.

The skill level, knowledge of traffic law and access to pedestrian facilities amongst these students varies greatly, resulting in significant confusion and unnecessary risk.

The university community would certainly benefit from creating streets that work for drivers, cyclists and pedestrians. Among other elements promoting safety and access across the city, the plan includes renewed attention to West Avenue, and bike boulevards on King and 17th streets.

For its part, UW-L could offer increased education for students who are new to La Crosse, getting more cyclists off the sidewalks and into the bike lanes. The student body and campus
police might consider more warnings or notices for jaywalkers and dangerous riders in order to encourage good behavior. UW-L also could apply to the League of American Bicyclists for Bronze certification, a recognition Western Technical College already enjoys.

We can’t speak for UW-L, but speaking for ourselves, we believe that the plan is worth funding, that the student body wants improvement and that now is the time to build support for La Crosse’s future.

With a city council vote on funding likely coming in November, students and community members should voice their support for this vision. The city has taken the first step by creating the first bike-ped plan in decades; now is the time for the university and the community to support making the streets of La Crosse safer for us all.

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