

Northland's high road toll blamed on lack of resources for Road to Zero strategy

By [Angela Woods](#)

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Tracey Rissetto, AA Northland District Council chair, says more resources need to be put into road engineering and enforcement to make Road to Zero work. Photo / Tania Whyte

The Road to Zero programme is having a positive effect on road safety, Waka Kotahi says, despite Northland recording its highest road toll for two decades last year.

In 2022, 38 people died in crashes on Northland roads, two years after the launch of the national strategy to decrease the number of deaths and serious injuries on the roads by 40 per cent in 10 years.

A Road to Zero monitoring report released in July last year showed [targets](#) for cutting the number of deaths and serious injuries on Northland's roads had not been met, with this number instead increasing by 14 per cent from 2020 to 2021.

AA Northland District Council chair Tracey Rissetto said it was a great strategy but there were issues with its execution in New Zealand.

“If you look at Switzerland who have done an amazing Road to Zero. A lot of that was because they actually spent a lot of money on road engineering.

“Victoria's the same - Victoria has had a marked decrease in fatalities but they have spent a lot of money on making the roads wider and not having culverts and just simple things like moving power poles out of the way.”

The fact the road toll had not fallen - particularly in Northland - was likely due to a lack of resources put into the programme, Risetto said.

Some good work had been done on the roads, Risetto said, such as putting in new wire median barriers on SH1 at Ruakaka and posts elsewhere, but “there’s a lot more work to be done”.

Enforcement around speed and impairment was inadequate, she added, with particularly low rates of [breath testing](#) in Northland.

“It’s not the police - they really want to make our roads safer too but are they resourced to do that?”



Flexible median barriers like this one have been put in on some stretches of Northland's state highways as part of Road to Zero. Photo / NZME

Fabian Marsh, senior manager of road safety at Waka Kotahi said certain areas where safety measures had been introduced had seen a reduction in crashes.

“We are clearly seeing some positive results from introducing specific safety measures with Road to Zero.

“For example, intersection speed zones at rural intersections, which work by activating an electronic variable speed limit sign to temporarily show a lower speed limit on the main road, have reduced total crashes in rural areas by 28 per cent and fatal and serious crashes by 69 per cent.”

Marsh said a lower number of fatalities across the country in 2023 compared to the same time last year was encouraging.

“Whilst each death is tragic, it is very encouraging that we are seeing lower levels of trauma so far this year. We recognise that there is more to be done.

“Throughout 2023 New Zealanders will see the installation of more life-saving side and median barriers, more police enforcement targeting unsafe behaviours, safe speed limits on our roads, promotion of safe vehicles and the delivery of more infrastructure to make our towns and cities safe for people walking and riding bikes.”

In Northland, 11 people have died on the roads this year, a similar number to 2021 but higher than in 2022.

The latest fatality was an 85-year-old man who died after his car left a Dargaville road and ploughed into a pohutukawa tree at around 5.30 am yesterday morning. It was confirmed by police the man died at the scene and inquiries into the cause of the crash are ongoing.

A police spokesperson said they are still committed to achieving a 40 per cent reduction in deaths and serious injuries.

“This is the target and together with our Road to Zero partners we remain committed to achieving this target.”

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Since the beginning of the financial year, police have conducted two million breath tests nationally, more than in the whole of 2021/22, they added.

The main target of New Zealand's Road to Zero strategy is to cut deaths and serious injuries on the roads by 40 per cent by 2030.

It was first launched in 2020, replacing the previous “Safer Journeys” strategy which did not set a target for a reduction in the road toll.

The current strategy is based on Vision Zero, a global movement that began in Sweden. Despite the name, it is not based on an immediate goal of eliminating crashes completely, but no longer accepting deaths as the cost of using roads.

Waka Kotahi [documents](#) released under the Official Information Act late last year revealed advice to ministers that the 40 per cent target was no longer achievable and 33 per cent would be a realistic goal.

Prime Minister Chris Hipkins scrapped most of the speed limit reviews on state highways last month, meaning they would now affect just 1 per cent of the network rather than 20-30 per cent, but reviews of local roads are unaffected.