Pedestrian fatalities are increasing to record levels. The number of pedestrian fatalities increased 27% from 2007 to 2016, while other traffic deaths decreased by 14%. This is an important public safety concern and an important environmental issue. It is also an environmental justice issue, with fatalities higher in disadvantaged communities.

The transportation sector accounts for 37% of greenhouse gas emissions in California. Local transportation and land use policies are critical to reducing these emissions. The Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act (SB 375) calls for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions through transportation, housing, and land use planning. The California Air Resources Board has set SB 375 greenhouse gas reduction targets, including a 19% reduction for the Sacramento Area Council of Governments and 16% for the San Joaquin and Stanislaus Councils of Governments.

To meet these goals and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, we need to reduce our dependence on automobiles and promote walking, bicycling and transit use. This includes land use policies that promote higher densities, making for shorter trips for work and errands. It also means improving bicycle and pedestrian safety. To get more people to use alternative transportation, we need to make sure they feel safe when they do. Walking and bicycle use increase when facilities like tree-lined sidewalks and protected bike lanes that separate vulnerable users from motor vehicles. And to increase transit use, we need to make sure people can walk safely from transit stops to their destinations.

Media reports of the rise in pedestrian fatalities have put much of the blame on driver and pedestrian distraction from cell phone use, but there are other important factors, including vehicle size. Improved vehicle safety features and seatbelt use have helped protect vehicle occupants, but do nothing to protect pedestrians. The heavier the vehicle the more likely a collision will be fatal. Between 2013 and 2017, pedestrian fatalities from sport utility vehicles increased by 50%.

Vehicle speed is also a major factor. The risk that a collision with a pedestrian will be fatal increases dramatically when automobile speeds exceed thirty miles per hour. Traffic speeds are determined by street design. For years planners have focused on accommodating traffic flow, including building roads that function more like local highways than neighborhood streets, with multiple lanes of vehicles travelling at high speeds. We need to focus instead on safety and walkable communities.

Many of our streets lack sidewalks and crosswalks, and safe pedestrian crossings are more than a half-mile apart in some areas. Yet our transportation dollars are being spent disproportionately on supporting vehicle traffic. We need a major funding shift to transportation alternatives, including pedestrian use.
Pedestrian fatalities are a public safety crisis we need to solve for our environmental policies to be effective, and our environmental policies are critical to improving pedestrian safety. The Mother Lode Chapter and its eleven groups are working on these issues through our participation in land use transportation planning activities, including plans for local transportation funding. The more successful we are in these efforts, the better we protect the environment, both locally and globally.