

Bill Rea ? Tragedy hit home for me

I seem to devote a lot of my energies these days writing about traffic snarls.

But it is also a fact that they are very top of mind with a lot of people, and come up frequently in media reports, especially those coming out of Toronto. It took last week's tragedy, in which a young girl was struck down and killed in Leaside to raise all these questions yet again. And it took that incident for these issues to hit home again with me.

I spent a little more than five years in the late 1990s editing community newspapers throughout that part of what is now known as the Megacity, and my office was in Leaside, meaning I got to know that area very well.

It's been some years since I was in that neighbourhood, but from what I've been hearing and reading over the last couple of days, I suspect things have not changed much. Leaside is a very quiet, and rather picturesque residential area, which happens to be surrounded by some of the busiest streets in the municipality, including Eglinton and Bayview Avenues.

The stretch of Bayview that runs down the western boundary of Leaside was largely retail, especially on the east side. There was also lots of on-street parking to accommodate the shoppers. That meant Bayview was not a fun street to drive when trying to get about in Leaside. Eglinton was always busy, but it was also designed with the idea of getting traffic through the area as expeditiously as possible, so driving it was not much of an ordeal. But from what I've been hearing, that's not so much the case these days.

Construction work on Eglinton is creating lots of messes.

My office was on the west side of Laird Drive, which was a pretty busy street in my day and has become busier in the years that have followed. Whenever it was possible, I made a point of approaching the building from the north so I would be able to make a right turn to get into the parking lot. That frequently meant driving along some of the internal roads in Leaside. Thus, I became very familiar with the area, especially the busy McRae Drive and Millwood Road intersection where last week's tragedy occurred.

For a quiet residential area, I also remember it was a fairly busy place, with a large park and playground, community facility, public library and fire hall in the area. If memory serves, there's also a fairly active church nearby. That meant there was usually something going on in the neighbourhood, with a sizable amount of traffic. There were a couple of TTC bus routes there too.

But people who are in the area frequently, as used to be the case with me, would know the situation and know what to look out for. That, of course, should be the case in any neighbourhood, with motorists passing through being expected to act accordingly. If one is passing near a park, playground, school zone or a place where kids may congregate, they have to be on their guard. Because little kids sometimes don't think. They're supposed to, but that's not always the case. Drivers have to be ready.

And it's not just children who cause problems. I have seen adults do dumb things while wearing their pedestrian shoes. Check out some of the major downtown Toronto intersections in the middle of a work day. If the light is green, people walk. Do they look both ways, as those of us who attended schools in this part of the world were told to do by Elmer the Safety Elephant? Hell no! I often want to give my head a shake. Do they not realize drivers will sometimes ?gun it? when they realize the lights are about to change? Since I haven't heard of any catastrophic events at downtown intersections, I have to assume that drivers in that area are on their guard.

That too, alas, is not always the case. Drivers are human beings too, meaning they are fully capable of being stupid, or maybe just inattentive.

I'm not trying to sound holier than thou. I've done some dumb things behind the wheel, and I have the tickets and convictions to prove it.

There have also been suggestions that all the construction activity has had a hand to play in last week's events. I don't know how legitimate that issue is.

I think it's the same case for all of us when it comes to construction. If there's a road we regularly use that's torn up, then we have to find an alternate. That means driving roads with which we might not be familiar, hoping we eventually get to where we're going. But even lack of familiarity does not relieve drivers of their responsibilities, and that includes using common sense when driving through areas where there's lots of retail, pedestrians or children.

Construction can be a real pain. As a man who routinely parks in the municipal lot in the Bolton core to get to the Citizen office, I know about as well as anyone how annoying it can be. That parking lot has been in various stages of being ripped apart for weeks, although things are finally back together now.

There are other construction sites around town too.

Is banning construction the answer? It would be nice, but hardly realistic.

Roads are full of infrastructure, upon which we all depend. It's not just pavement, but also water and sewer lines and other utilities that wear out and sometimes need repair or replacement. Trust me ? the alternative would be really hard to deal with.

Besides, traffic mishaps happen all the time and all over the place, whether there's construction or not. Construction activity might seem like a convenient scape goat, but such thoughts are not very productive.

There are other factors that add to the traffic woes, such as the closing of various roads to accommodate certain events. I check Toronto news websites regularly, and it seems the items about road closures for various festivals and the like serve almost as reminders that another weekend is upon us. The weekend we have just gone through included, among other things, the Honda Indy. I have no problems with these events. Indeed, the only problem I had with the Indy was I was so damned busy I only had time to watch the end of it.

Events like these can bring dollars into a business community. The Indy is certainly a great example of that, as was the recent Pride Week festivities. Granted, they can be a pain for the public trying to get to places, but they are also well publicized, giving people the opportunity to make alternate arrangements.

And there are the more localized community events. I hear of them, and have to wonder if they are radically different from the recent Cheltenham Day, or the upcoming Midnight Madness in Bolton. For that matter, think of how much Bolton roads are disrupted with the annual Santa Claus Parade. Streets have to be blocked for such events. But again, with ample warning and signage, such problems are manageable. And people using their common sense can get around them, and the rest of the community is not put at risk.

As is often the case, last week's tragic events in Leaside prompt many to start looking for directions in which to point the finger of blame. As of this writing (Sunday morning), we don't have all the details of what went on. But it would seem to me that seeking ways to prevent such tragic incidents would be the way to proceed, as opposed to finding someone or something to blame

