

Editorial ? Can we make our highways safer?

Even a single highway fatality is one too many, but recent months have brought with them a totally unacceptable rash of deaths on area roads.

At least one of the fatalities was apparently the result of distracted driving, which the Ontario Provincial Police say has overtaken drunk driving as a major cause of road deaths, and that crash and some others have been on five-lane-wide stretches of Highway 10 in Caledon, where the road design clearly reduces the risk of head-on collisions.

Obviously, no highway design can be an absolute guarantee against fatalities, particularly when fog or snow intervene, but that can surely be ruled out as a factor in fatalities that occur on five-lane portions of Highway 10 or to the south on 410.

However, it clearly can be a problem on any highway on which comparable traffic loads are crammed on to two lanes, such as is the case on Highway 9 between Orangeville and the Holland Marsh, or on Airport Road.

We suspect that any survey of road deaths in Canada's 10 provinces would show that they are reduced significantly when a busy highway's shoulders are paved with signalized intersections; something Peel and Dufferin have at a few places ? flashing amber lights warning that the green signal is about to change.

For some reason never adequately explained, Ontario's trunk highways have neither safety feature, but there's no statistic we know of that proves our point, one possible explanation being that for some reason (potential litigation?) police investigations of fatal crashes that might show a need for improved safety measures are never released to the public.

A classic example of the problem was the recent three-death crash at the junction of Dufferin Road 10 and the Mono-Amaranth Townline, just north of Orangeville, where for some reason a southbound car failed to observe a stop sign. We're told an OPP report on the crash will go only to local road authorities.

There's no doubt that a lot of planning and negotiations went in to the decision to pave the full length of the Mono-Amaranth Townline, and there's similarly no doubt that, as the best route between Shelburne and the west end of Orangeville, it now carries a lot of traffic.

However, there's precious little evidence that the advance planning included any consideration of the need to improve safety at places where the Townline meets a paved east-west roadway. Instead, all that has happened since the road was paved was the creation of four-way stops where the Townline previously had the right-of-way.

For some reason, four-way stops tend to be installed primarily as a means of reducing speeds or discouraging traffic, rather than as a safety measure.

Just as is the case with five-lane highway designs, four-way stops at busy intersections aren't a foolproof way of preventing crashes. But with them, a serious crash will occur only if more than one driver fails to observe the stop sign and check for other traffic. At such intersections, the safety margin after dark can be increased through the provision of good illumination and flashing red lights.

Yet another means of improving road safety would be the replacement of politicized speed limits (those provided in response to residents' complaints of high traffic volumes on newly paved roads) by limits based solely on road designs and population densities.