

Editorial ? Let's de-politicize our speed limits

We suspect that few residents of today's Ontario are aware of the fact that, at one point in the province's history, science and testing played a role in establishing speed limits.

In response to a clamour for a departure from ultra-simple speed laws ?30 miles per hour in urban areas and 50 on rural roads of every type ? the government of premier John Robarts initially allowed variances that reflected the fact superhighways and gravel roads didn't need the same limits.

The initial reform saw some busy urban arteries like Toronto's Lake Shore Boulevard and University Avenue given higher limits of 35 or 40 m.p.h. and freeways like the Queen Elizabeth Way and Highways 400 and 401 new limits of 60 m.p.h., while some better two-lane provincial highways were posted at 55.

But that was followed up by a more significant reform, which involved police quietly monitoring highways to determine the speeds actually being driven. The result was a further revision of the speed limits, aimed at setting maxima at speeds not exceeded by 85 per cent of the drivers.

The result was a decision to raise the freeway limit to 70 m.p.h. ? about 115 km/h ? and to make 60 m.p.h. the standard on all major two-lane highways, including even Highway 10 south of Forks of the Credit Road, which then was a narrow, rough asphalt road with particularly narrow shoulders. (Recognizing the road's dangerous condition, the government almost immediately launched a program to widen it to four lanes.)

The reformed speed limits remained in force until the mid-1970s, when shortages produced by an Arab oil embargo led the U.S. Congress to impose a uniform 55 m.p.h. maximum on all federal and state highways, including even the Interstate routes that in some states had limits above 70 m.p.h.

Seemingly determined to go one step further, the government of then premier Bill Davis passed a law that cut the maximum speeds on southern Ontario's ordinary King's Highways to 50, although the top legal speed on freeways was reduced only to 60 from 70. South of the border, the uniform 55 m.p.h. limit has long passed into history, and today some Interstate routes are posted at 80 and most have limits of at least 70 m.p.h.

A similar phenomenon has occurred everywhere else in Canada, with 100 km/h the favoured speed limit on ordinary paved roads. Only in Ontario are the speed laws so far removed from reality that the government has seen a need to have a ?racing? law that includes loss of licence and fines of up to \$50,000 for going 50 km/h above the posted limit. (And that is the consequence facing a driver in the bizarre 80 km/h zone at the north end of Highway 410 who is caught doing 130 km/h ? just 10 km/h above the top limit in B.C.)

One thing that should be investigated would be the potential of introducing electronically operated variable speed limits, at least on freeways. Lower speeds would be imposed to reflect changing conditions, be it fog, whiteouts or congestion.

As we see it, the aim should be to have our speed laws reflect actual conditions rather than political expediency, with the objective of making all drivers see the wisdom of going ?with the flow? rather than saving a few minutes at the risk of losing their lives and those of others.