

Editorial ? Some guidelines are clearly needed

Back in the 1950s, Toronto got its first subway and with it a rash of suicides, the Yonge Street subway having supplanted the Bloor Street viaduct as a favoured spot for those intent on losing their own lives.

Confronted with this unexpected phenomenon, Toronto Transit Commission officials and Toronto police decided on a two-pronged approach. In hopes of reducing the number of suicides they asked the local media not to report on them, and to minimize the disruption to subway service they developed procedures that saw service routinely resumed after about 20 minutes.

Obviously, that wasn't always possible, particularly when there was a possibility that the victim had not jumped but been pushed off the platform.

Over the years since then, no similar approach has been evident in other areas where police must deal with fatalities or significant personal injury accidents.

For example, a few weeks ago GO Transit's busy Lakeshore commuter service was interrupted for hours when a man was fatally injured after apparently stepping onto the tracks as the train approached. Although it was obviously either a suicide or a case of gross carelessness, a multi-hour police investigation resulted in massive inconvenience for untold thousands of commuters. We were left wondering what possibly was gained by the long suspension of service.

Part of the problem might lie in a specialization of police training, particularly within the Ontario Provincial Police. It now appears to be mandatory that traffic fatalities and personal-injury crashes be investigated by OPP Technical Traffic Collision investigators who may have to come from outside the local detachment's coverage area, resulting in the roadway in question being closed to all traffic for several hours pending completion of the investigation.

As recently as the Victoria Day weekend, that happened when a motorcyclist apparently lost control of his bike on Mulmur's twisty River Road and had life-threatening injuries. Assuming that the bike was off the road and there were no witnesses to the crash, we're left wondering what precisely the specialist investigators were able to accomplish that couldn't have been accomplished with traffic being allowed to move slowly past the scene.

Admittedly, there are many instances where road closures are necessary, particularly when tractor trailers jackknife, sometimes losing their loads, or when a multiple-vehicle crash closes all lanes of a highway.

But are they really necessary and in the public interest when only one vehicle is involved and there is no wreckage on the roadway? Just recently, traffic moving between Toronto and Sudbury was diverted from the Highway 400/69 route to Highway 11 between Parry Sound and Britt for about six hours. All the public was told was that there had been a serious accident and it was not known how long the busy roadway would be closed.

However, a story on the Sudbury Star's website later that day disclosed that a Sudbury man had been fatally injured when his vehicle left the roadway and struck one of the many rock faces found on Highway 69.

In all likelihood the victim either had fallen asleep at the wheel, was impaired, or lost control because of a mechanical defect or a tire blowout. But whatever the case, was such an incident really justification for closing the highway and forcing travellers to add at least an hour to their journeys?

Clearly, there is a public interest in having traffic fatalities properly investigated by police with appropriate training. However, there surely is also a public interest in minimizing the inconvenience to the travelling public, be they truckers, tourists or bus riders.

We are left wondering whether guidelines are in place designed to balance these competing public interests, and if so who designed them and whether they are being followed.

And if such guidelines do exist, they should take into consideration the vast difference between a detour in southern Ontario that adds a few miles to your route and one in the far north where there is no alternative roadway.