

Editorial ? Wanted: sensible laws, less tolerance

In our view, one reason Ontario had to come up with its draconian laws against 'racing' on our highways (by going more than 50 km/h above a posted speed limit) is that our current speed laws make no sense and are universally disobeyed.

After all, if everyone else is ignoring signs that impose the same 80 km/h limit on multi-lane highways and unposted gravel roads, why not just see how fast you can drive a car with a speedometer indicating it could do 220 km/h?

The fact of the matter is that no similar racing laws exist in the western United States, where some freeways are posted at 80 miles an hour, or in British Columbia, where some are posted at 120 km/h ? or, for that matter, in most of the other provinces where the limit on paved two-lane highways is the same 100 km/h now found on Ontario freeways and the 407 toll road.

Granted, some low speed limits do make sense, one example being the 50 km/h maximum on Forks of the Credit Road because of its rolling, winding character and status as a scenic route. But what could be said to justify the 60 km/h limit on the recently rebuilt and beautifully paved section of Blind Line between 5 and 10 Sideroad when the unimproved gravel roadway on Mono's 4th Line EHS is unposted and thus carries the once-normal rural speed limit of 80 km/h?

Similar observations could be made concerning the array of speed limits found in Caledon. Perhaps the ultimate example is Highpoint Sideroad, where the limits range from 40 to 80 km/h, the lowest being on the smooth, paved portion west of Highway 10. We wonder whether any Ontario government will ever have the courage exhibited half a century ago by the government of John Robarts when it ordered reforms based on the Ontario Provincial Police surveying the actual speeds being driven on various provincial highways.

The survey led to a decision to replace the province-wide rule of a 50 m.p.h. (80 km/h) limit in rural areas and 30 m.p.h. (50 km/h) in urban zones. The freeway limits went initially to 60 and later to 70 m.p.h., while those on two-lane roads rose to 55 or 60 m.p.h. Locally, lifting the limit to 60 on Highway 10 led to a demand to reduce the limit south of Forks of the Credit Road, where it was bumpy asphalt with extremely narrow shoulders. But instead of bowing to demands for the lower speed limit, the Robarts administration ordered the road rebuilt and widened to four lanes all the way from Highway 7 to the foot of the Escarpment.

It would be interesting, indeed, to see what would happen if a similar policy were pursued today. Our strong suspicion is that it would show that well in excess of 85 per cent of drivers on the widened portion of Highway 10 travel at or near 100 km/h, with the speediest traffic occurring in rush hours when commuters sense they'll not be ticketed thanks to the high traffic volumes.

Elsewhere in the province, traffic generally moves at speeds roughly 15 km/h above the posted limits, thanks to a longstanding policy of police 'tolerance' stemming from the days before metrication, when speeding tickets weren't issued to anyone not going more than 10 m.p.h. above the limits.

In our view, reform of the province's speed laws should be accompanied by a sharp reduction in tolerances aimed at encouraging all drivers to travel as close as possible to the new posted limits.

We think the appropriate policy would be as close as reasonably possible to 'zero tolerance,' with warnings replaced by tickets for anyone going more than 5 km/h above the new legal maxima.

And particularly on two-lane highways, the rule should be 'go with the flow,' with passing being restricted to zones where a third lane has been added.