

The Special Committee on Traffic Safety

It is inherent in the technology of the car that every time someone gets behind the wheel they are immediately impatient. You generally drive because you want to get somewhere sooner than walking or riding a bike. Compound this with the fact that for a few generations drivers in Saskatchewan had wide open spaces with relatively few cars and you have a problem with people's attitude towards driving. With a society built around motor vehicles many people still believe it is a right to drive and not a privilege and compounded with so many bad drivers to observe the new driver quickly develops bad driving habits.

An accident by definition is something unexpected or unavoidable. All collisions can be expected and therefore avoidable. Collisions can be caused by a manufacturers error, poor vehicle maintenance, not driving for weather or road conditions, being distracted by what can only be called the in-car culture of phones, monitors and eating, or not obeying the rules of the road. There are no traffic accidents.

Saskatchewan has to develop a new definition of Good Driver - a good driver being someone who obeys the rules of the road, is courteous and patient. This can only be done through education and the enforcement of the laws which exist to keep the carnage, injuries and fatalities to a minimum.

Successive governments, for either political or ideological reasons, have failed to keep up with the changes in technology and societal attitudes to the point that Saskatchewan generally leads the nation in traffic fatalities per kilometer driven.

In the past as a driving instructor and teacher I petitioned successive ministers about improving the Driver Ed program. One example: students are first prepared to obtain a learner's permit and then are immediately taught the completion of the course as though they were experienced enough to be familiar with all the nuances of driving. Driver Ed training needs a break of a few months between obtaining a learner's and completion of the course so that the new driver can more easily relate to the information being given them. Unfortunately the program is rushed through before the student has developed enough driving experience to appreciate the information.

The minimum requirement for experienced drivers should be a written test every five years. Drivers are expected through osmosis to learn any new rules regarding driving and there is now no way of knowing if they have or have not, this includes civic bylaws governing traffic. When I started driving there were no green arrows, recent legislation has required that drivers slow passing working tow trucks, merging on freeways is new to many drivers here and it quickly becomes obvious to any observer that a great many drivers do not know how to do so. I once informed the police sergeant in charge of traffic policing in Saskatoon that his officers did not stop at red lights before turning right and he did not know this was a requirement! Red means stop, no exceptions, few drivers do. We cannot let this go on without making sure people know all the rules. Frequent testing is also a reminder that driving should be taken seriously, the costs in the long run of frequent testing would be nil because of the reduction of collision costs.

People (and kids?) on bicycles in our cities are repeatedly being told without the benefit of training or safety equipment to “drive in traffic, because bikes are traffic”, this makes no sense. The attitude towards safe bicycling here is so far behind the times that it is difficult to even know where to start, something has to be done.

Anyone driving a compact car on two lane highways at night will tell you that they are constantly blinded by oncoming vehicles' headlights because of the enormous number of jacked up pickup trucks (many illegally) without their lower beams adjusted accordingly. Pickups now normally have bumpers that line up with the head of the drivers of smaller cars allowing bumpers to have no function plus vehicles are jam packed with technological distractions. Hands free cell phones have been proven numerous times to be just as dangerous as hand held phones or driving drunk. All of these and many other unsafe designs in vehicles seem to be no longer under the control of the provincial or federal governments. Manufacturers and dealers do not police themselves and it is imperative that our governments do one of the jobs that they exist for, requiring the meeting of safety regulations. It needs to be done forcefully because I, and you, have too many dead or disabled friends and relatives from collisions.

When I was a kid everyone knew that truckers were the best drivers, this is no longer true. Loaded twin trailer grain haulers drive 10-20 kph above the speed limit everywhere. Loaded twin gas haulers are allowed to pull a third trailer on #11, anyone who knows about Saskatchewan weather and swaying jackknifing trucks can see the insanity in this situation. Do we need the village of Chamberlain to go up in a ball of fire before something is done? These thirty wheelers pounding of the road surface causes tens of millions of dollars in damage annually and creates stress for other drivers. It is obvious the industry is not very well regulated and that there are far too many inexperienced truckers. This should not be allowed to continue.

Traffic law enforcement now is only about a quarter of what it was thirty years ago. I can easily point out hundreds of infractions daily in the city of Saskatoon. The whiners cannot be allowed to continue to control the agenda when it comes to traffic control. Proper policing would more than pay for itself through fines and savings in damage and injuries and the grief and time lost. Why this is not done has always boogled my mind, what is the benefit for successive governments to not enforce the rules of the road? Is it to not antagonize the voter or is it that no one cares? It can only be one or the other, it certainly is not cost.

The number one rule of defensive driving is patience. Most car ads use speed as a selling point, this is completely irresponsible. (Why do governments allow this?) I've always told my students that if you're going to work or an appointment and you can get there in ten minutes then always allow at least fifteen. The impatience of being delayed due to detours, road conditions, amount of traffic, etc. is the main cause of irritability, risk taking and poor decisions. Studies have shown that with one more second to react 80% of collisions can be avoided. Speeding is the norm on most roads and it is due to the poor attitude towards driving in this province. Most drivers do not know how to pass, this leads to tailgating a very dangerous practice. At a hundred kilometers an hour a tailgating driver 2-3 car lengths behind a driver who may spot something the driver behind does not see and hits their brakes hard will allow the tailgater to have less than half a second to react before collision time or to go into a precarious move which will either cause a collision by swerving violently into the other lane or off the road, no one's reflexes are that fast. Impatience and indifference are always the culprit.

In 1994 during the MLA hearings into the subject of .04 alcohol and driving the Saskatoon chief of police, myself and others made pitches for frequent testing, obviously just filed away. I'm hoping this committee will finally take things seriously and not just be another group posing as if something is being done. The recent record fatalities and collisions show we have a long way to go. There are jurisdictions like Ontario and California where much can be learned from as Saskatchewan grows. The attitudes that allow children to drive ATVs, kids to ride bicycles on streets surrounded by two ton vehicles, snowmobilers to drive on bumpy snow 100 kph ten feet away from vehicles on our highways (unbelievable!) and the endless parade of internal combustion vehicles causing noise, air and visual pollution everywhere needs to be addressed. We now have many children regularly driving miniature adaptations of ATVs, trailbikes and snowmobiles with gas engines and they grow up with a sense of entitlement about driving which is part of the poor attitude.

The listing of problems and solutions can go on forever but basically they're all the same and they're all related to poor attitude and indifference.

It's the 21st century and being a senior it bothers me that the car, trucking and oil industries do what they want and control one of the biggest killing and grief causing activities of human behavior, driving. This situation is not good for our economy, it is not good for our health. We need to realistically define what a good driver is and we need governments to do their job.

I was frustrated that I could not appear before the committee in person because of missing a deadline. In our village I do not know how I was supposed to learn about this event and I am an informed person. The advertising was inadequate.

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