

Opening Plenary Session

Following a welcome reception Monday evening, the opening session on Tuesday, November 18, included welcoming remarks from representatives of the sponsoring organizations, including Alan Clark, Director of H-GAC and Carlos Lopez, Director of the Traffic Operations Division of TxDOT. Adrian Garcia, Mayor Pro Tem of the City of Houston and Harris County Sherriff-elect, welcomed attendees on behalf our host city.

The opening session concluded with addresses by Dr. Jeff Michael, Associate Administrator of Research and Program Development at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Honorable Steven Chealander, Member of the National Transportation Safety Board.

While noting Texas' enviable record in reducing traffic fatalities in recent years compared to the US as a whole, Dr. Michaels also emphasized several areas where Texas – and the rest of the nation – need to improve. These include: increasing seat belt use among teens and the hard-core group who both do not buckle up and tend to be involved in crashes; increasing the use of helmets among motorcycle riders; and addressing the still high rate of alcohol involvement in crashes.

After outlining NTSB's mission and procedures and citing several recent investigations of major highway incidents, including the 2005 bus fire on Interstate 45 near Wilmer, Texas that killed 23 during the Hurricane Rita evacuation, Mr. Chealander turned to NTSB's role as a highway safety advocate and NTSB's "Most Wanted List" of safety improvements for the nation and Texas. He emphasized two areas of particular concern: hard-core drinking drivers and child passenger safety. He defined hard-core drinking drivers as repeat offenders with a BAC ≥ 0.15 g/dL; noting also that such drivers typically believe they will not be caught – and usually they are right. Among the many approaches to addressing the hard-core drinking driver issue discussed by Mr. Chealander (e.g., vehicle sanctions, restrictions on alcohol-related offense plea bargaining, raising high BAC charges to an aggravated offense, etc.), he particularly emphasized the need for Texas to authorize and implement sobriety checkpoints. With regard to child passenger safety, Mr. Chealander emphasized both the need for proper use of child restraint systems and recommended booster seat legislation in Texas.

The emphasis on alcohol-related crashes by both Dr. Michaels and Mr. Chealander was taken a step further in the closing remarks of luncheon speaker Harris County Judge Ed Emmett. He concluded his luncheon address with the admonition and challenge that, despite all of the good work done by conference attendees in reducing traffic fatalities on Texas streets and highways, real progress in highway safety will not be realized until Texas and the nation "gets serious" about drinking and driving. Only by implementing tough policies, procedures and penalties can we significantly reduce drinking and driving.