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Rethinking America’s Driving Culture: The Key to Safer Roads?

We have done a lot of things right when it comes to traffic safety in the United States.

Forty years ago, five Americans died for every 100 million miles we traveled. Today, it’s just over one person. It’s a remarkable improvement. So, how did we make so much progress?

For starters, we built safer cars and installed roadside safety devices like guardrails and breakaway poles. We even came up with more visible wording on all our street signs. And in our emergency rooms, we save more lives of injured crash victims thanks to advanced medical techniques.

No doubt, we’ve made our roads a lot safer. But for the last 10 years, our fatality rates have flattened out. Is it because the so-called “easy improvements” have already been made? Safety experts — the ones who have studied crash data — say the highest percentage of traffic deaths today involves some aspect of human behavior. For example, speeding, drunk driving, distracted driving and other risk-taking activities play a role in a large number of crashes and fatalities.

CTS Senior Research Scientist Quinn Brackett and other safety experts have embraced a new way to make long-range and significant changes. They call this new approach the “Traffic Safety Culture Concept.” It’s aimed at changing driver behavior through political influence, information, education and social pressure.

“For far too long, law enforcement alone has been our way of dealing with safety issues, and we’ve only paid lip service to education,” Brackett says. “Although enforcement is extremely important, laws by themselves have limited success if they do not also attempt to change the underlying values of our driving culture.”

Brackett endorses several new measures aimed at changing our driving culture:

• educate pre-drivers with classroom instruction on safe driving techniques;
• urge elected officials to become proponents of safe driving behavior;
• convince existing drivers about the benefits of changing their behaviors;
• publish crash statistics and names of traffic offenders; and
• conduct public information and education campaigns to reinforce safe driving behaviors, economy in driving (including conservation) and civility.

Motor Vehicle Fatalities and Injury Rates per 100 Million Vehicle Miles Traveled (1966-2008)

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Rethinking America’s Driving Culture (continued from page 1)

In order to highlight the significance and impact of traffic crashes in Texas, Brackett points to a crime statistic for comparison. In 2008, there were 1,374 homicides in the state. That’s compared to 3,500 traffic deaths.

“Changing our traffic safety culture will not be easy,” Brackett admits. “It will take time and effort, but in my view it’s the only way to significantly lessen the tragedy of traffic deaths in our society.”

The issue of safety culture is especially important as it relates to the most vulnerable road users.

Advisory Council Integral Part of CTS

When the 10 members of the Center for Transportation Safety (CTS) Advisory Council meet on Feb. 3, they will hear an update on the safety initiatives underway at CTS. But, just as important, CTS staff will find out the safety issues important to them.

“The Advisory Council represents a broad spectrum of transportation experts who have firsthand knowledge of the safety problems impacting the state and the country,” says CTS Director John Mounce. “We rely on them for guidance, and their input is critical to what we do.”

CTS Advisory Council members come from law enforcement, public health organizations, state and federal government, municipalities, insurance agencies, transportation engineering, and education.

The current members of the advisory council are:

- Carol Rawson, Traffic Operation Division interim director, Texas Department of Transportation;
- Al Alonzi, assistant division administrator, Federal Highway Administration;
- Frank Marrero, Region VI program manager, National Highway Transportation Safety Administration;
- Chief John Madden, deputy assistant director, Texas Department of Public Safety;
- Jeff Kaufman, safety program manager, Houston-Galveston Area Council;
- Beth A. Ramirez, assistant director, Public Works and Transportation, City of Dallas;
- Joseph D. Blaschke, president, Transportation Engineering Analysts;
- Dr. J. Steven Moore, executive associate dean, School of Rural Public Health, Texas A&M University Health Science Center;
- Ronnie L. Vandiver, Texas marketing manager, State Farm Insurance; and
- Dr. Arnold “Arnie” Vedlitz, director, Institute for Science, Technology and Public Policy, Texas A&M University.

Advisory Council meetings are held every 18 months at CTS in College Station.
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**CTS and Texas A&M Study Mobility in Border Colonias**

Most mobility research focuses on urban, economically developed areas. It makes sense — more densely packed people cause more congestion, which reduces mobility, increases pollution and poses a greater challenge to safety. But sometimes that means mobility research can overlook smaller, less-affluent communities.

To try and balance that equation, Texas A&M University and the Center for Transportation Safety (CTS) at the Texas Transportation Institute studied mobility in the border colonia of El Cenizo, 10 miles outside Laredo. The study was sponsored by the Southwest Region University Transportation Center.

“We can promote a better quality of life in traditionally disadvantaged communities by improving the mobility of the people in them,” explains Dr. Cecilia Giusti, assistant professor in Texas A&M’s Department of Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning. “But we first must understand how mobility impacts residents.”

The team considered the transportation, urban design and planning, safety (traffic and crime), public health, and socioeconomic dimensions as potential indicators of residents’ mobility behaviors, environmental perceptions and quality of life. Researchers developed instruments to record residents’ perceptions and habits as well as to observe and record the community environment. What they discovered surprised them.

Rather than ride a bike or drive short distances within the colonia, residents walked whenever it was practical. This was true even at night, despite the border’s reputation as a high-crime area.

Although having small businesses in the community also encouraged walking, “we found that people walked more for social/recreational purposes, to interact with their neighbors, for example,” says Dr. Chanam Lee, associate professor in Texas A&M’s Department of Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning. “Part of that is culturally representative of the Hispanic community, but it also speaks to the mobility limitations of residents and the lack of utilitarian destinations in the colonia.”

According to the study, walking encouraged community cohesion since residents are more likely to get to know one another. And it had another effect too — walkers have a more negative impression of their environment than non-walkers. The reason for that is simple: when you walk, you have more time to evaluate the environment around you.

Still, the prevailing feeling among residents was positive toward their community, something the researchers attribute to their personal investment in building it. Sweat equity, it seems, helps determine community self-pride.

“Although we didn’t really look at ‘sustainable transportation’ in this community, we touched on a number of its basic concepts,” explains Dominique Lord, assistant professor in the Zachry Department of Civil Engineering and associate research scientist with CTS. “The idea of building community solidarity by designing communities that encourage social activities — like walking when possible and getting to know your neighbors — is fundamental to the idea of sustainable transportation.”

Giusti says a small investment in a community like El Cenizo can yield large returns in terms of community cohesion and safety: “Simply updating the bus stops and making sure the transit system runs on time would add significant value to the quality of life in this colonia.”

Photos courtesy of Giusti, Lee, and Wieters.
Motorcycle Safety Forum Gears Up for Fifth Annual Event

For the first time in nine years, the number of motorists who died on Texas roadways is on the decline. According to preliminary figures for 2009, 414 people were killed in motorcycle crashes. That’s compared to 526 fatalities in 2008. However, no one in the motorcycle community is cheering just yet.

“Of course, we are pleased with the lower number of deaths,” says Center for Transportation Safety (CTS) Associate Research Scientist Patricia Turner, who spearheaded the motorcycle safety campaign called “Look. Learn. Live.” “But, we all know we still have a huge problem, especially considering the 2008 number was a 26 percent increase in deaths from the previous year.”

Four years ago, CTS initiated the annual Motorcycle Safety Forum, which led to the creation of the Texas Motorcycle Safety Coalition and the Texas Education Agency’s efforts to include motorcycle safety awareness into driver education classes.

In the 2010 Motorcycle Safety Forum slated for Feb. 11 in Austin, one of the scheduled presentations will detail landmark motorcycle safety legislation, which went into effect Sept. 1, 2009. Among other provisions, the new laws (authored by Sen. John Corona) require new riders to complete a basic motorcycle training course and impose fines up to $4,000 for violators who fail to yield right-of-way and who cause serious bodily injury.

“It’s evident that these forums are making a difference,” says Turner. “For that reason, I think it is imperative that they continue — it gives us all a chance to focus on what the issues are and how we can make things better.”

The forum brings researchers, safety groups, riders, instructors, law enforcement and government agency representatives together for a full day of dialog.

For more information about the forum, go to http://tti.tamu.edu/conferences/tmsf10/.

Unifying the Safety Effort: 2010 Traffic Safety Conference

It’s clear — especially after glancing at the proposed agenda for the upcoming 2010 Traffic Safety Conference — that communities, agencies, and the state and federal government are determined to make our roadways safer. Exactly how that’s achieved is up for discussion.

The Texas Transportation Institute’s Center for Transportation Safety (CTS) is organizing the event in partnership with the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) and the Texas Department of Public Safety.

“This is the second Traffic Safety Conference organized by CTS,” says Director John Mounce. “We are building on the success of the first event with a panel of safety experts and keynote addresses from the leaders of TxDOT and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. We will also have numerous break-out sessions examining the key safety issues we are facing in Texas.”

The conference, with the theme “Putting the Pieces Together,” will be held March 29-31 in Dallas. Registration information and the conference schedule can be viewed at http://tti.tamu.edu/conferences/traffic_safety10/.

It’s attended by community and government leaders, law enforcement, transportation experts and safety personnel from across the state.

“The Traffic Safety Conference details the way we can reduce traffic crashes,” Mounce explains. “It examines our traffic laws, safety policies, research efforts and enforcement measures — but most importantly, the conference puts us all on the same page so we can tackle safety with a unified effort.”

Some of the issues addressed during the planned break-out sessions include motorcycle safety, wrong-way driving, safety issues in freight operations, sobriety checkpoints and changing the driving culture.
Recently, when Center for Transportation Safety (CTS) researchers received the latest crash statistics for the state of Texas (which includes years 2003 through 2008), it became obvious that some drivers in the Lone Star State do not pay attention.

On average, 18,000 people are killed or injured each year in Texas due to “driver inattention.” And there’s good reason to believe there’s a lot more distracted driver crashes that go unreported.

“Accident investigators will only mark ‘driver inattention’ on their report when it’s clear that’s what contributed to the crash,” says CTS Director John Mounce. “I believe the reported numbers are just a fraction of the real problem.”

CTS recently increased its focus on research into distracted driving, with the goals of increasing understanding and awareness of its effects. “Distracted driving in Texas and the rest of the country began making headlines in recent years thanks to crashes caused by drivers who were texting or using cell phones,” Associate Research Scientist Laura Higgins said. “But, in reality, a driver can be distracted by all kinds of things.”

According to a new U.S. Department of Transportation website dedicated to bringing attention to the growing problem, “distracted driving is any non-driving activity a person engages in that has the potential of distracting him or her from the primary task of driving and increase the risk of crashing.” For example, http://distraction.gov/ classifies radio channel surfing and talking with other passengers as distracted-driving behaviors.

Nationwide, 18 percent of all crashes list driver distraction as the main or contributing factor. U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood has made public awareness of driver distraction a priority. He convened a Distracted Driving Summit last September, and key members of USDOT presented sessions on the topic at the recent meeting of the Transportation Research Board, which Higgins attended.

“Based on the number of people killed or injured from distracted driving, we must make it a priority as well,” Higgins said. “Every day we see people talking on their cell phones, texting, putting on makeup — and even eating while they drive.”

Higgins and Senior Research Scientists Maury Dennis and Quinn Brackett will be investigating potential research projects to address the issue, including the development of materials for schools and driver education programs. Higgins says improvements will only happen if we change our behaviors.

“I think if we all approach driving with a new attitude, we can make a lot of progress,” Higgins said. “Texting, using our cell phones or doing anything else while we drive has the potential for disaster. Driving is not the time for multitasking.”
Welcome Aboard!

**Whitney M. Burleson** joined the Center for Transportation Safety (CTS) in October as a research assistant in the Behavioral Research Program. Her responsibilities are to assist with collecting data for the program as well as to assist with the Texas Safe Communities project. Burleson is currently finishing her B.A. in Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin. She works in the Austin Urban Office and is originally from Houston, Texas.

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**Katherine Connell** joined the Human Factors Group in August as a research associate after working for CTS as a student worker. She is working primarily on logistics and recruiting for driving studies and managing the collected data. She graduated from Texas A&M in May with a B.B.A. in Marketing and is originally from Dallas, Texas.

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**Lisa Minjares** started full time in July 2009 as a research assistant to Dr. Maurice Dennis. Her responsibilities include preparation of curriculum materials, presentations and grant proposals for the Expert Witness Training Program and the Alcohol and Drug Traffic Safety Training. Minjares is currently working on the CTS Distracted and Drowsy Driving Program and the Adult and Juvenile Probation Personnel Training Program.

Minjares graduated from Texas A&M with a B.A. in Psychology. She has been working for the Center for Alcohol and Drug Education since 2007.

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**Stacey Schrank** works in the Behavioral Research Group, primarily in the area of motorcycle safety. This is her second time working at the Texas Transportation Institute. In the early 1990s she worked in what was the Human Factors Program helping with occupant protection and child safety seat surveys. For the past 15 years she worked at Texas A&M University for the Student Information Management System as a software applications developer.

Schrank has a B.S. in Political Science and a M.S. in Urban Planning, both from Texas A&M.

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