Changes in CTS leadership — Mounce retires, Wunderlich takes reins

Robert Wunderlich has been named the acting director for the Center for Transportation Safety (CTS) at the Texas A&M Transportation Institute (TTI). Wunderlich is taking over for John Mounce who retired in August.

Mounce’s career in transportation engineering spans more than three decades. In that time he authored numerous research studies, served as a lecturer at Texas A&M University and a professor at Montana State University, and led the center for 10 years.

“John has significantly increased TTI’s national prominence in safety research,” said Dennis Christiansen, TTI Agency Director. “As the director of our legislatively created safety center for the last decade, he has been instrumental in establishing the Institute’s reputation for providing safer roadways and protecting vehicle occupants. He has devoted his life’s work to saving the lives of others, and he will be missed. We wish John the very best in his retirement.”

Wunderlich formerly served as the City of Garland’s senior managing director for transportation, streets, engineering and stormwater. He assumed his new responsibility at TTI on July 9 and will be leading the various research programs for the center and promoting the center’s work to all of its internal and external stakeholder groups.

“We are extremely pleased that Robert is joining TTI,” says Bill Stockton, Executive Associate Agency Director. “His outstanding reputation and real-world experiences make him an ideal addition to our strong team. We are enthusiastic about the unique attributes that Robert brings to the Institute and look forward to a long and valuable relationship with him.”

Wunderlich has held positions at the City of Austin, the City of Arlington and Barton-Aschman Associates, Inc., an engineering consulting firm in Dallas. He holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees in civil engineering from the University of Tennessee. He is a past international president of the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) and was named the Transportation Engineer of the Year by the Texas District of ITE in 2007.

Wunderlich’s appointment brings him full circle in his career, returning to TTI where he worked as an engineering research associate from 1982 until 1984. He has maintained his connection with TTI since that time in a variety of ways, most recently by helping bring TTI’s Teens in the Driver Seat® program to all the high schools in Garland, Texas, in 2006.

“I feel that this new position is a unique opportunity to use my experience and skills to make a difference in the lives of Texans, Americans and others across the globe,” Wunderlich says, “by helping to provide safer roadways and safer vehicle occupants and by understanding and developing programs for high-risk groups.”
Adding rural shoulders, width reduce crashes, save lives

Texas highways are safer now thanks to scores of projects completed in the last few years to add shoulders and width on more than 1,000 miles of rural, two-lane highways, according to an analysis by the Texas A&M Transportation Institute (TTI).

The review of 189 Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) road projects around the state shows that wider pavements make highways safer and result in fewer crashes.

Recently, TxDOT asked TTI to analyze and review three years of pre- and post-improvement data on more than 1,000 miles of narrow two-lane highways that had been widened. The numbers show that on 1,159 miles of recently added highway shoulders, there were 133 fewer fatalities and 895 fewer injuries compared to prior to widening.

TTI has estimated that these projects could save up to 44 lives each year or 880 lives over 20 years—and prevent 298 injuries or 5960 injuries over the same time period.

"Safety is our top priority," said Phil Wilson, TxDOT Executive Director. "The agency’s roadway widening initiative has been a tremendous success, both for increasing safety on Texas highways and potentially saving billions of dollars associated with fatal crashes and sustained injuries."

In 2003, voters gave the Texas Transportation Commission the authority to issue $3 billion in bonds to pay for state highway improvements. The law stipulated that 20 percent of that amount must be used to fund projects that would reduce crashes or correct or improve hazardous locations on the state system. The Texas Legislature later increased the bonding authority to $6 billion. In 2004, TTI helped TxDOT identify locations across the state where the road widening projects could be expected to yield the most significant crash reductions.

TTI is also analyzing recently completed projects, mostly from the 2009 safety bond initiative; but these projects reflect only one or two years of post-construction crash data. Still completed widening projects from that bond initiative, fatalities were reduced by an average of five annually. The $29 million construction cost for those 37 projects — through the 20-year life of the project — could save an estimated $456.4 million from fewer fatalities and serious injuries.

Researchers expect to update their analysis once three years of crash data are available for the balance of safety improvement projects across the state.

"I am proud of the role I played in creating the Safety Bond Program, and I sincerely thank TxDOT and the people of Texas for making it happen," said Senator Steve Ogden, R-Bryan.

TxDOT plans on expanding these efforts in the future in areas where widening improvements are needed.
A closer look: ALR and license plate projects

Evaluation of Administrative License Revocation process in Texas

In this effort, Center for Transportation Safety (CTS) staff worked to identify the strengths and opportunities for improvement within the current Texas Administrative License Revocation system (ALR). Researchers determined the effect of ALR on deterrence of impaired driving; the deployment of the program is intended to change the behavior of the public based on the expectation that they will lose their driver license if caught for driving while intoxicated. To measure the process impact, surveys and focus groups were conducted with the public to gauge awareness of the ALR process.

“ALR is intended to provide a significant deterrent to impaired driving, but in order for that to happen the process needs to be timely and effective,” said CTS Senior Research Scientist and Project Manager Melissa Walden. “This project looks at the effect those two factors have on the criminal process.”

Researchers will also evaluate the ALR hearing process and impact on criminal procedures, and contact a sample of individuals who are DWI offenders. The final report for this project will include the rationale for ALR along with a discussion of the history of ALR in the state. This background will provide stakeholders with the necessary perspective to understand the data and the associated analysis.

Examining the effects of one license plate versus two

Researchers were tasked with evaluating the effects one rear license plate versus two license plates on vehicles have on the ability of law enforcement, tolling agencies and border patrol to identify vehicles and monitor traffic safety activities. Researchers examined multiple states — two states that require one license plate and three states that require two license plates — through interviews with enforcement and tolling agencies as well as vehicle observation. Additionally, automatic license plate reader data were examined in both types of states. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed to provide a thorough understanding of the issues surrounding the identification of vehicles.

“The interesting thing about this project is that it has allowed us to see how a very specific factor on a vehicle affects our transportation system,” said CTS Senior Research Scientist and Project Manager Melissa Walden. “As a cost-cutting measure, a lot of our enforcement — be it tolling, parking, homeland security, or law enforcement — has become an automated process. The license plate is a key factor in vehicle identification for that automation, and without proper identification, states are losing a large amount of revenue.”

The analysis for this project is complete and researchers are in the process of finalizing the report. The report will be available in September.
Annual gathering draws roadway safety leaders

With the theme of improving safety on highways in Texas and across the nation, the leader of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the retiring state legislator known as “Senator Safety” were featured speakers for the Center for Transportation Safety’s (CTS’s) 4th annual Statewide Traffic Safety Conference, June 4–6, in San Antonio.

David Strickland, NHTSA Administrator, told the group of more than 200 that the nation now has its lowest number of traffic fatalities since 1949. “Those successes frankly pale to the fact of how many people we still lose. It is still vexing for all of us that when we do make gains we still have that many more people we have to reach. The job is never, ever done,” he told the group of traffic safety professionals, pointing to the fact that 33,000 people die in crashes annually nationwide.

State Senator Steve Ogden, who was the luncheon speaker later in the day, also acknowledged the decreasing fatality rate in Texas, but with a note of caution. “Over the last 10 years our fatality rate has dropped by 25 percent. We are still losing 3000 Texans on our highways. But it used to be 3500. We have made a lot of progress, but we are obviously not done. Three thousand is too many. That’s as many people as we lost in the World Trade Center.”

Ogden, who announced his retirement months earlier, said he began vigorously supporting traffic safety legislation 12 years ago when he realized that it did not seem to be a priority. At the end of his speech, Ogden was honored by the Department of Public Safety, the Texas Department of Transportation and TTI.

“Very few of our elected officials have really been dedicated or given a high priority to safety in our state,” Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) Agency Director Dennis Christiansen said during his tribute. “Senator Ogden clearly has.” Among other measures, Ogden is credited with safety improvements on rural highways, supporting the installation of cable barriers in highway medians, and creating the Center for Transportation Safety at TTI. “He consistently kept roadway safety in the minds of everyone in the legislature,” Christiansen said.

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2012 Safety Conference

In fact, the conference slogan for 2012, “Saving Lives: Nothing’s More Important,” was borrowed from a speech Ogden gave several years earlier.

The conference attracts law enforcement, transportation safety researchers, policy makers, public health officials, traffic engineers and other safety professionals from around the state. This year, conference goers attended sessions that focused on impaired driving, distracted driving, teen driving, motorcycle safety, wrong-way driving, Texas speed limit changes and numerous other topics.

“I’m so proud of the work that you’ve done.” John Barton, TxDOT Deputy Executive Director, told the crowd. “You’ve made our transportation system safer, and in the process, you’ve saved lives. You’ve educated all of us to buckle up, and not to drink and drive. You’ve encouraged all of us to be mindful that we share the road with cyclists, pedestrians and motorcyclists.”

Notable quotes from the Traffic Safety Conference

“If you drive while you’re drunk and you kill somebody, it’s too late to turn the pages back. If you leave your baby in a [hot] car, it’s too late to change the page. If your child doesn’t wear a child-safety seat or you don’t wear a seat belt and you’re involved in a crash, it’s too late”
— Frank Marrero, NHTSA Program Manager

“A lot of companies and businesses are getting on board with how serious distracted driving really is. This will continue to be a hot topic until there is a shift in our driving culture when we view this topic as taboo.”
— Christine Yager, CTS Associate Transportation Researcher

“For six years in a row, over 90 percent of motorists in Texas are buckling up, which equates to 2,800 lives that have been saved. Almost half the people that are killed in Texas crashes were not wearing their seat belts. It’s startling and it surprises me that that’s the statistic.”
— John Barton, TxDOT Deputy Executive Director

“Statistically speaking, you are on two wheels so you are at a physics disadvantage. Why stack the odds against you even more.”
— David Strickland, NHTSA Administrator, on motorcycle helmet use

“This whole issue of drinking and driving is really getting out of control. I want to put an executive commissioner in the governor’s office that will find ways to reduce drinking and driving in the state. For example, why is it in the Midwest and Northeast people drink more per capita, yet, their DWI statistics are better than ours.”
— State Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer on hiring a DWI Czar for Texas

“Safety legislation is interesting to watch because there are so many things that have obvious safety benefits in them. We know that if they were implemented, they would save lives and reduce accidents. But, they also have associated with them issues involving privacy or big government, or differential impacts on demographic groups. It’s members of the legislature who have to grapple with all those issues and decide what will be put into laws.”
— Dennis Christiansen, TTI Agency Director

Top: David Strickland, NHTSA Administrator speaks to attendees about motorcycle helmet use.

Bottom: Attendees at the 2012 Traffic Safety Conference listen to opening session speakers.
Panel puts spotlight on ‘no refusal’ enforcement strategy

Changing its ‘no-refusal weekend’ policy to full time in October last year, San Antonio became one of the first cities in Texas to require suspected intoxicated drivers who refuse to take a breath test to submit to a blood sample, 24 hours per day. That controversial policy — and its impact on safety — was examined during this year’s Traffic Safety Conference, which was held in San Antonio.

No refusal was also a big part of the speech given by Police Chief William McManus during the opening session of the conference.

“I’ve come to take [DWI] very seriously because we’ve had so many mishaps,” McManus told the crowd as he described, in emotional detail, the deaths of four of his officers who were hit by intoxicated motorists. “We are paying a heavy toll. Last year we arrested over 6,000 people for drunk driving. Even though we’ve had some success in reducing fatal crashes, it continues to be an issue because most people don’t think it [driving while intoxicated] will happen to them.”

Speaking after McManus, NHTSA Administrator David Strickland called no refusal policies “an additional arrow in the quiver. What Chief McManus said today moved me,” he said. Of the 3,000 traffic fatalities in Texas in 2011, more than 35 percent were alcohol related. Texas leads the nation in the number of deaths related to drinking while driving.

Retiring State Senator Steve Ogden mentioned driving while intoxicated numerous times during his keynote address at the conference. “What’s the single most important thing you can do to reduce the traffic fatalities further in the state of Texas?” he asked. “The answer is almost instantaneous. Get the drunks off the road. I know we are making a major initiative here in San Antonio. But one of my frustrations in rural Texas is that there is still complacency about this issue.”

An entire session of the conference examined the full range of ‘no refusal’ policies and practices and the personnel involved in the process including arresting officers, blood-draw nurses, magistrates and the prosecutor.

“Everyone agrees that DWI is a crime,” Bexar County Assistant District Attorney Chip Rich told session attendees. “Taking blood is a common practice in this day and age. It’s really not a barbaric thing at all. We are just using it under the 4th amendment for a criminal offense.”

Rich said that before no refusal went into effect, 42 percent of the drivers who were suspected of being intoxicated refused to take a breath test, and 79 percent of the DWI cases that went to trial were defendants who refused. He said that 40 percent of those cases were found not guilty, compared to only a 10 percent acquittal of those that submitted to a breath test.

“We are increasing our conviction rates, and decreasing our alcohol related crashes and injuries,” he said as a result of no refusal.
State Senator Steve Ogden was honored jointly by the three state agencies most involved in realizing his vision for enhancing roadway safety in Texas. The recognition came in response to Ogden’s keynote address at the 4th annual Texas Traffic Safety Conference in San Antonio on June 5. The conference is sponsored by the Center for Transportation Safety (CTS).

“Mention the name ‘Senator Safety’ to just about anyone in or around the state capitol, and chances are, they’ll know exactly who you’re talking about,” noted Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) Director Dennis Christiansen in his recognition of Ogden. “In the history of the Texas Legislature, very few elected officials have been as steadfastly committed to roadway safety as Senator Steve Ogden. And, more important, even fewer have been as effective in their purpose.”

As part of the recognition, Ogden also earned praise from John Barton of the Texas Department of Transportation and Chief Luiz Gonzalez of the Texas Department of Public Safety.

Ogden served as chairman of the Senate Infrastructure Development and Security Committee when the Legislature was shaping the state’s most significant transportation policy ever in 2003. As part of that legislation, the senator ensured that 20 percent of all roadway bond financing would be spent on safety improvements. More than $1 billion has been invested in those safety improvements since the program began.

Ogden is also responsible for the creation of CTS, located at the Texas Transportation Institute, which began operations in 2001.

“It’s been an honor and satisfying responsibility to be in the state legislature for the last 22 years,” Ogden told the audience. “I would like to think that the state is a bit better then when I first found her. And because of the decisions we’ve made in the legislature, tomorrow will be better than today.”

Along with Barton and Gonzalez, Christiansen presented Ogden with a framed collection of photographs representing some of the safety enhancements he has made possible along Texas highways, with an inscription reading: “In deep appreciation of your vision, tenacity and leadership in the pursuit of safer roadways for the citizens of Texas, and of your years of generous public service distinguished by legislative actions that have saved, and will continue to save, the lives of countless Texans.”

“I don’t know of anything more tragic than that knock on the door in the middle of the night when somebody’s got to tell someone their loved one just lost their life. All of you in this room that are involved in protecting the public, thank you. It’s a big deal,” Ogden said, receiving a standing ovation following his speech.

(Left to Right) TTI Executive Director Dennis Christiansen, State Senator Steve Ogden, TxDOT Assistant Executive Director for Engineering Operations John Barton and Texas Department of Public Safety Chief Luiz Gonzalez.
Traffic Safety Conference addresses greater risks, countermeasures for motorcyclists

Sixteen percent of all fatalities in Texas involve motorcyclists, according to David Strickland, the Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. A recently licensed motorcyclist himself, Strickland was a speaker during the opening session of the 4th annual Traffic Safety Conference in San Antonio June 4–6.

“I love motorcyclists and I love motorcycling, but motorcyclists don’t necessarily love me,” he told the crowd of more than 200 law-enforcement personnel, transportation researchers, policy makers, public health officials, traffic engineers and other safety professionals from around the state. “I will tell anybody, wear a helmet, wear the right clothing, and get yourself into a riding class. Because statistically speaking, you’re on two wheels, so you’re at a physical disadvantage. Why stack the odds against yourself even more?”

Strickland informed the group that motorcyclists also have a much higher rate of riding impaired when compared to passenger-vehicle drivers. And, although Texas crash fatality rates have steadily decreased over the last several years, that’s not the case where motorcycles are concerned. “The fatality rate with motorcycles is really keeping Texas back in term of overall fatalities.”

“While we saw a decline in motorcycle deaths for the first time in over a decade in 2009, we must continue our efforts to promote sharing the road safely and watching out for motorcycles,” says Patricia Turner of the Texas A&M Transportation Institute’s Center for Transportation Safety. “The most recent statistics show that motorcycle fatalities increased by 10 percent, from 435 in 2010 to 479 in 2011.”

An entire session of this year’s Traffic Safety Conference was dedicated to motorcycle safety. Speakers for the session included Turner and Jude Schexnyder, chair of the Texas Motorcycle Safety Coalition.

“Motorcyclists are 25 more times more likely than passengers in cars to be killed in an accident, and they are five times more likely to be injured,” TxDOT Deputy Executive Director John Barton said during his speech at the opening session of the conference. Barton informed the crowd that he was involved in a crash with a motorcyclist in 1997. “I flat out did not see them,” he said, adding that motorcycle safety programs like Share the Road, are necessary. “It’s important for all of us to remind each other that we have to pay attention and we have to take a second look.”