DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

NEWS

FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20590

NO GREATER PRIORITY

ADDRESS BY FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATOR
F. C. TURNER BEFORE ANNUAL HIGHWAY SAFETY
CONFERENCE OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
WOMEN HIGHWAY SAFETY LEADERS, INC.
OCTOBER 5, 1971, SHOREHAM HOTEL, WASH., D.C.

I am delighted to be here today, both because the subject is highway safety and because I truly believe that the efforts of women's groups such as yours will do much to make our highways safer. I think it is a fine thing that an organization such as the National Association of Women Highway Safety Leaders came into being, and I am sure you will accomplish much. I commend you for your active interest in this vital subject.

At the outset, let me state unequivocally to you that there is no greater priority in the Federal Highway Administration's program than saving lives on the highways. Safety has been a primary factor in the Federal-aid highway program ever since the first Federal-Aid Highway Act was passed 55 years ago, back in 1916.

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We have always placed the greatest emphasis on safety in building our Nation's Federal-aid highways. We continue to do so today, and we will continue to do so tomorrow. And we welcome the efforts of all in reducing fatalities and injuries on our highways.

Of course, we work very closely with our sister Department of Transportation agency, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in this common cause of making our highways safer.

As you know, there are three general factors that can be involved singly or in combination in highway accidents -- the driver, the vehicle, and the road. The first two areas are the responsibility of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; the third area -- the road -- is obviously the responsibility of the Federal Highway Administration.

At your meeting here you are focusing worthwhile attention on the problems created by the alcohol-addicted driver, and I want to say that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is making admirable strides in attacking this problem. We at the Federal Highway Administration share in this desire to keep drunken drivers off our roads -- but when they do get out there, it is our job to try to save them from themselves -- and to save others from the consequences of their folly. The same applies to the reckless driver or the negligent driver.

We also completely support the goal of building safer vehicles, with built-in protection for the occupants. But when a vehicle does fail

and goes out of control -- as all things mechanical do at times -- we want to give the occupants maximum chance for survival by making the road and the roadside as hazard-free as possible.

So I think it is apparent that the Federal Highway Administration's efforts complement those of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration -- and those of groups such as yours.

Of course, the Federal Highway Administration has official responsibility for the administration of a bit more than three of the 16 National Highway Safety Standards. These are the standards which relate to the highway facility and its operation, the driving environment and road user relationships under provisions of the Highway Safety Act of 1966. These standards specifically pertain to:

-- Identification and Surveillance of Accident Locations.

-- Highway Design, Construction and Maintenance.

-- Traffic Control Devices.

-- And Highway Related Aspects of Pedestrian Safety.

Although we still have a long way to go, our joint efforts in the highway safety campaign <u>are</u> showing results. Last year, for example, the highway fatality rate of 4.9 per 100 million vehicle miles of travel was an all-time low. Contrast that, for example, against the 9.18 rate in 1946, or the 16.8 rate in 1934. The modern, safer roads we have been building have played a great role in this substantial rate reduction, which has been achieved despite the fact that more drivers are driving more vehicles more miles of travel each succeeding year!

And for the first seven months this year, the rate has been running even lower than last year -- at about 4.8.

However, any number of lives lost on our highways are too many, and a very encouraging thing last year was that the total number of fatalities, at 54,800, was 1,200 under the 1969 total.

But all of us in this great crusade for safety must redouble our efforts, for already during the first seven months of this year 30,250 people have lost their lives in highway-related accidents.

One of the most obvious things that have been done in the highway program to provide greater built-in safety is the construction of the Interstate System freeways. Already some 32,000 miles of the ultimate 42,500-mile System are in operation, and they are paying tremendous dividends. These are the best engineered and safest roads the world has ever known. Entirely divided highways, with a minimum of four lanes; with no intersections at grades; no stoplights; completely controlled access; with no sharp curves or steep grades, these freeways contain the ultimate that modern technology can provide.

Since this great program began 15 years ago, back in 1956, it is estimated that some 30,000 lives have been saved that otherwise would have been lost on older, less safe roads. And when the entire System is open and operational later in this decade, it is estimated that some 8,000 lives will be saved annually because of its use.

The inherently greater safety provided by these Interstate freeways is pointed up graphically by comparative fatality rates. On the Interstate, the rate is 2.9, while on all other roads it is 5.6 deaths per 100 million miles of driving.

That is quite a difference!

However, human nature being what it is, we know that even on the safest, best-engineered roads, vehicles sometimes do go out of control -- either because of driver error or mechanical failure -- and when they do, they frequently collide with something.. Often that something is an appurtenance of the highway itself: a steel or concrete pole holding informational or directional signs, bridge piers, some types of guard rails, the space, between twin bridges, and the gore area on bridges and overpasses.

On modern freeways, such hazards are often eliminated. But where that is not possible, we have turned to the use of breakaway sign posts and energy absorbing barriers -- and these devices are saving untold numbers of lives.

The breakaway sign posts, which now are mandatory for new signs erected along Federal-aid high-speed highways, are designed to move forward and upward out of a vehicle's way upon impact, usually resulting in relatively little damage to the vehicle and little or no injury to its occupants.

The energy-absorbing barriers, placed in front of hazardous fixed objects, come in several varieties: clusters of empty barrels, barrels

partially filled with sand, cylindrical plastic tubes partially filled with liquid. They all are designed to absorb the energy of the impact, greatly reducing damage to the vehicle and the possibility of severe injury to its occupants.

Actually, these safety devices are proving so effective in saving lives and minimizing injuries that we are having some difficulty in compiling any kind of scientific statistics.

The reason for this is that in many instances the driver is either uninjured or injured but slightly after slamming into one of these devices, and is able to drive his car away without reporting the collision. Of course, this in itself is impressive evidence of the effectiveness of these new devices and the impact they are having in reducing the highway death toll.

Our continuing "Spot Improvement" program is another method we have of making older roads safer. Under this program, State highway departments identify hazardous sections of existing roads, and then eliminate the hazards. Since March, 1964, work has either been programmed or completed on more than 6,300 safety projects at a total cost of $1.23 billion. Of this total cost, approximately $700 million has been in Federal-aid funds.

In this program, a continuing effort is made to eliminate sharp curves; bury the ends of guard rails in the earth to avoid impaling accidents; remove dangerous roadside appurtenances; provide better sight distances, and the like. It is a very practical program -- and a very effective one.

Another way we are improving existing roads and streets is through our TOPICS program -- which is an acronym for Traffic Operations Program to Increase Capacity and Safety. Initiated in 1967, this program essentially assists cities of all sizes in obtaining more efficiency and safety from existing roads and streets through application of relatively inexpensive traffic engineering techniques. Improvements are such as better signal systems, channelization, pavement markings, signing, turning lanes at intersections, one-way streets, better roadway lighting, and construction of pedestrian or highway grade separations.

There now are nearly 800 active TOPICS areas around the Nation, and it appears obvious that the contribution of the TOPICS program toward increased safety in urban areas will be a substantial one.

It has been estimated that if 20 percent of our urban area passenger car users were to be diverted to buses -- particularly during rush hours -- traffic accidents and fatalities would both be reduced by approximately nine percent. Well, recent legislation has given us the tools to provide preferential treatment for bus rapid transit in urban areas -- either through exclusive bus lanes, such as on Shirley Highway here in the Washington area; completely new "busways" or private roads for buses, and perhaps car pools; and through specially regulated traffic signals and on and off ramps on freeways. While our primary goal in this program is reducing traffic congestion during rush hours by making it attractive for more commuters to ride buses, the substantial safety benefit is very much a factor.

In the next few years new, international-type of traffic signals and markings are going to be implemented throughout the Nation. Relying much more on pictures and colors, rather than words, these devices are based on our just-issued 1971 edition of the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices. It is the considered opinion of the many experts who gave this matter extensive consideration that these changes will lead to greater traffic safety.

Moving on to another area, we have a nationwide bridge replacement program under way. This calls for all of the 236,000 bridges located on any of the Federal-aid highway systems to be inventoried, classified as to serviceability, safety and essentiality for public use, and to be assigned priorities for replacement. Many of our bridges are 40 years old, or even older, and the need for this safety program is, I think, quite self-evident. During fiscal 1972, as the new program gets under way 43 obsolete bridges in 43 States will be replaced with modern, safe structures. And this is only the beginning.

Another area of the Federal Highway Administration's activities in which highway safety is a total concern is our Bureau of Motor Carrier Safety. This Bureau has the responsibility of governing the safety of operation of some 2.5 million commercial trucks and buses operating in interstate commerce, involving more than three million truck and bus drivers.

We have promulgated new and revised rules covering the qualifications of these drivers and safety of operations on our highways. We are systematically reviewing and revising the entire body of rules and regulations to improve highway safety. And we are also administering

and enforcing these rules in the field. Last year the Federal Highway Administration inspectors in the States checked some 43,000 commercial vehicles and ordered more than 10,000 of them "out of service" because of serious defects.

Safety considerations play a very prominent role in the Federal Highway Administration's research and development program. Let me give you some examples of how research can lead to safer roads.

As a result of research, it has been established that pavement lane widths of 12 feet are desirable on our Interstate and other main highways; that sharp curves and steep grades in combination are particularly hazardous; that stop-and-go traffic signals at certain types of intersections will increase accidents; that combinations of reasonably flat grades and adequate weight-horsepower ratios for trucks will reduce the number of slow moving vehicles; that slower vehicles are many times more likely to be involved in an accident than those traveling at the same speed as the traffic stream; and that truck climbing lanes can compensate for steep grades on existing highways.

Research has indicated that one-way streets reduce accidents, as well as congestion; that certain types of aggregates will tend to polish and become slippery when used in pavements, and should be avoided in highways.

Research findings are useful not only for new construction and new design standards, but for older highways, as well. In new design, of

course, we can largely obviate the need for energy-absorbing barriers, but these will continue to make great safety contributions on older roads. On the two-lane main highways that still are the bulwark of the highway transportation systems in many States we can make meaningful improvements, such as grade separations at critical intersections; painted or other types of median divider strips to separate opposite direction traffic; and we can introduce a limited amount of control of access, particularly where commercial or industrial development is creating a safety problem. It is on many of these streets and highways that we shall need to focus our future safety programs.

Speaking of the future, I believe the highway program after completion of the Interstate System will have to focus on two areas: the cities and our Primary System of roads. The latter are the highways that are usually -- though not always -- signed as U.S. routes, such as U.S. 1, for example. I am convinced that we must convert the heaviest traveled of these roads into "Junior Interstates," by building a parallel two lane road to make divided highways out of them.

This will of necessity be a major Federal-State program -- involving funding of at least $2 billion annually -- and it is one which will provide tremendous safety benefits. That is because of all the safety factors that have been developed in highway construction, divided highways have shown the greatest impact in reducing accidents, other than control of access itself.

So this "Junior Interstate" program I am suggesting will be a very major safety undertaking -- one which I believe will have enormous impact in reducing the Nation's highway death toll. It is a program worth selling to the American public; it is a cause that not only is just but crucial. We welcome support of it.

I could go on at much greater length about the role of highway safety in the operations of the Federal Highway Administration, but I have had your attention long enough I do believe I have presented you with sufficient evidence to back up my opening statement that the Federal Highway Administration has no greater priority than highway safety.

We have been and we are making progress in this crusade against highway fatalities. But none of us can afford to lessen his efforts -- indeed we must all redouble our efforts.

Thoreau said, "It is not enough to be busy; so are the ants The question is: what are we busy about?"

I think there is no better cause that we can busy ourselves in than this vital cause of highway safety.

Thank you for inviting me here today. It has been a distinct pleasure for me to address this group.

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