Our Transportation System is in Crisis - XXVII

Road safety is critical to transportation policy. Government should feel responsible for traffic accident data collection and analysis, road safety education and enforcement.

The behaviour of our motorists, pedestrians and other road users is symptomatic of our people's level of careless, reckless, and generally lawless attitudes. Like someone said, we have laws, but they have become optional. Traffic accidents and fatalities cost society in the form of resource costs, such as loss of earnings of the person involved in the accident, assistance by police and administration, medical and ambulance, and damage to property; as well as subjective costs, such as pains, suffering, loss of amenities of life, loss of expectation of life, and inconvenience and discomfort. Every road safety improvement measure, whether it is done through road design and construction, road maintenance and rehabilitation, traffic management and control, or through education and enforcement, saves lives and provides benefits for our people.

On highways, the major contributors to safety are access control and separated opposing traffic. According to the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), the sudden change in speed required by a highway vehicle, caused by another vehicle entering or exiting the highway directly without use of a speed change lane is very often responsible for potential crashes, and consequential interference with other vehicles on the roadway. A highway with a median width of 15m or more has a very low incidence of head-on collisions caused by vehicles crossing the median. With narrower medians, median barriers will eliminate head-on collisions.

As explained in an earlier article, there is no freeway as yet in Trinidad, and the nearest example is the Solomon Hochoy Highway (SHH). Last year, according to Police reports, the SHH had 41 fatalities resulting from 1,084 accidents, of which 668 accidents had no injuries. In 2004, there were 17 road fatalities from 398 accidents, of which 228 accidents had no injuries. In 2003, there were 9 road fatalities from 274 accidents, of which 170 accidents had no injuries.

Between 2003 and 2005, there has been an increase in road fatalities on the SHH of more than 350 percent, and an increase in road accidents of nearly 300 percent. The leading type of accident was rear-end, totalling 880 over the three years, closely followed by the vehicle being out-of-control, with a total of 560 over the same period. Twenty percent of the road fatalities were as a result of the vehicle being out of control, and 4 percent as a result of rear-end collisions. However, more than 22 percent of road fatalities were pedestrians – on the highway!

The highway is no place for a pedestrian to await transport, cross at-grade, or vend. When the Solomon Hochoy Highway was built there were fences on both sides of its road reserve in urban areas to prevent any pedestrian access, and there were appropriate signs placed on the highway accordingly. Today, as part of our deteriorating values there are no fences and people cross and use this highway like a street.

There may be several factors responsible for a vehicle going out of control, including speed. The current method applied by the Police to enforce speed is too primitive to be effective. Speeding has a good chance of being enforced, provided modern speed detection technology is introduced with appropriate legislative arrangements. The speeding motorist may also easily be recognised through tailgating, changing lanes without indicating, and running red lights, and this is an opportunity for motor cycle Police to be more visible and effective.

Naparima Mayaro Road (NMR) is a two-lane, single carriageway east-west arterial road in the south of Trinidad. Last year, according to Police reports, the NMR had one fatality resulting from 694 accidents, of which 549 accidents had no injuries. In 2004, there was another road fatality from 640 accidents, of which 502 accidents had no injuries. In 2003, there was no road fatality from 705 accidents, of which 294 accidents had no injuries.

Between 2003 and 2005, the rate of road accidents on the NMR has remained fairly steady. The leading type of accident was rear-end, totalling 736 over the three years, closely followed by the vehicle side-swipe, with a total of 456 over the same period. While there were almost no fatalities, the number of injuries during this period increased by 300 percent from a figure of 104 in 2003. These injuries were about 90 percent related to passengers and drivers.

In order to improve the safety performance of our roadways, scientific approaches must be applied to assessing deficiencies. At present, a sound traffic accident recording and analysis system does not exist. The Traffic Management Branch of the Ministry of Works and Transport used to collect, as part of its responsibility, accident records from the Police, and would prepare elaborate reports of accidents occurring annually, by date, classification, location, and frequency, weather, road surface condition, etc. They would further conduct detailed investigation of the critical accident locations in order to reduce the number and intensity

of accidents. This accident data collection and analysis is no longer undertaken, and has been so for a long time.

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