

Excerpts from “Driven to Distraction” by Arthur Schurr as it appeared in the *Women’s Transportation Seminar – Los Angeles Chapter Newsletter (June 2004)*

In Southern California, it’s easy to be driven to distraction. But now it’s time to **Watch the Road**.

George Carlin once joked that, “Anybody going slower than you is an idiot, and anyone going faster than you is a maniac.” Unfortunately, the reality of driving in Southern California is no joke. In the past five years, 3,550 people have died on roadways in Los Angeles County as a result of traffic accidents. Some 440,000 more sustained injuries of varying degrees from those collisions. Each year, nearly 200,000 traffic collisions in Los Angeles County choke freeways and cause untold delays and expense. Given that cars, trucks, buses, and the roads themselves have been made safer than ever before, there’s only one responsible factor still unaccounted for - people. And that’s exactly what the **Watch the Road** program seeks to address.

“I’ve been working for cities in California for 33 years,” explains Wayne K. Tanda, General Manager for the Los Angeles Department of Transportation (LADOT). “During that time I’ve been to countless meetings where individuals have expressed their anger, grief, and frustration that more hasn’t been done to save lives on the road. I’ve heard people talk about losing a spouse, a brother, a friend, or a child.”

“So I’ve been doing my best to make things safer. But all too often these crashes are the direct result of individual behavior, not of the way a roadway or a vehicle was designed. That’s why the focus of the Watch the Road campaign is to change behavior. This is not about crazy drivers, though. Normal people - good, well-intentioned, usually responsible people - will often drive too fast through a residential area or near a school. People lose perspective. In Los Angeles it can reach extremes. I’ve seen drivers hold phone meetings, put on makeup, eat their breakfast, read - these are all dangerous behaviors, but it can be changed. We’ve got to get drivers to understand that reading the newspaper while driving is not worth their lives, or someone else’s.”

According to Luz Echavarria, Project Manager for the Watch the Road campaign, the mission is simple. “Watch the Road is designed to raise awareness and reduce bad behavior. You can see that this campaign is essential if you just look at the statistics on traffic accidents, injuries, and deaths. And those statistics are getting worse. We must reduce the number of accidents and relieve congestion.”

“To do that, we’ve identified the 10 worst behaviors associated with traffic accidents and injuries. We’re going to target them through the media. In addition, we’re going to use performance measures to gauge the program’s effectiveness. We’re going to compare the number of injuries and fatalities occurring two years before and after the program goes into effect. And we’ll adjust the program to optimize the campaign, because optimizing this campaign translates into saving lives.”

The Watch the Road Web site (www.watchtheroad.org) lists the following “Top Ten Roadway User Bad Behaviors”:

1. Driving too fast for conditions (speeding)
2. Aggressive driving
3. Inattentive driving
4. Driving, cycling, running through a red light
5. Driving under the influence (DUI)
6. Not yielding to pedestrians
7. Walking without looking
8. Walking outside the crosswalk
9. Cycling on the wrong side of the road (against traffic)
10. Not Buckling Up!

Both Tanda and Echavarria point out that cars, trucks, and buses are not the only targets of the campaign. Addressing behavior by cyclists and pedestrians is an integral part of the program as well. Tanda explains, "In accidents, pedestrians and bicyclists are the most vulnerable, and usually suffer the most severe injuries. People assume that a car will stop because there are white lines on a crosswalk. Bicyclists regularly ride on the wrong side of the street, and ignore traffic signals. They are responsible for changing their behavior and following the law."

While the focus of the campaign is to save lives and prevent injuries, there are other conditions that the campaign hopes to ameliorate as well. Director of Caltrans District 7, Douglas R. Failing, explains, "There are two types of congestion. Recurrent congestion happens when too many people try to use the same roadway at the same time every day. Non-recurrent congestion is a result of an event, an accident. Recent statistics show that non-recurrent congestion could be responsible for as much as 60 percent of the problem. Yet little has been done about that kind of congestion."

"We also know there are three major factors that cause accidents: the vehicle, the roadway, and the driver. Sometimes it's a combination. Usually, however, the vehicle is responsible for only 2-3 percent of the accidents that happen. The roadway causes 10-12 percent. And the driver causes 50-60 percent of the accidents that happen. The **Watch the Road** campaign addresses driver-based, non-recurrent congestion. Solving that issues will not only save lives, it will save some of the time and money that is wasted every day because of congestion. Watch the Road is a vital strategy, a win-win for everyone in Southern California."

Watch the Road was launched by Operation Traffix, a collaboration of transportation organizations. Founding partners include the Automobile Club of Southern California, the California Department of Transportation, the California Highway Patrol, the City of Los Angeles Department of Transportation (LADOT), the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works, the Greater Los Angeles New Car Dealers Association, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and the Southern California Association of Governments.

Since the programmed commenced in mid-May 2004, this group has grown to over 50 participants, including municipalities as well as other public, private, and not-for-profit sponsors. The program is expected to last for at least 18 months. However, the other founding members are seeking funding to sustain and expand the program to neighboring counties in California. Judging by the relentless number of traffic accidents and fatalities occurring year in and year out, adopting this program statewide cannot happen fast enough. Because it's easy to be driven to distraction, especially on Southern California freeways. But to save money and lives, it's time for everyone to **Watch the Road**.

This article has been reprinted with permission from the Women's Transportation Seminar - Los Angeles Chapter. More on WTS-LA can be found by visiting <http://www.wtsnational.org>

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