

**AAA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
LAUCLAN MCINTOSH**

ROAD SAFETY PRESENTATION

**AUSTRALIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION
2004 NATIONAL LOCAL ROAD CONGRESS**

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Thank you for the opportunity to take part in today's "showcasing best practice in road safety in local government."

I've had the opportunity to participate in a number of road safety conferences, including the Safe Roads conference earlier this year in Melbourne.

What strikes me about those conferences and also from discussions and observation, is the amount of effort that local governments are putting in at the road safety "coal face". There is little doubt that your efforts, through the Black Spot programs and R2R for example, save lives.

I know from the detailed national surveys we do that the members of the motoring clubs appreciate your efforts - our surveys show that as time goes by, motorists are becoming more satisfied with the condition of local roads. But they think more needs to be done and they also have limited understanding of what really are the important factors in road safety.

As a national organisation, the AAA can see that to leave much of the difficult job of improving the safety of roads to local councils, would be remiss. That is why we have formed the *SaferRoads* project.

SaferRoads brings together the AAA, representing the motoring clubs, the Australian Local Government Association, Australian Trucking Association and Australasian College of Road Safety. The project has the support of numerous other organisations like the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons.

Before I get into the details about *SaferRoads*, I'd first like to spend some time on the reasons that we see the need for a new approach to road safety.

Every day in Australia 5 people are killed on our roads. 5 people every day. Many of them are young men and women—the future of Australia.

I understand there are about 530 delegates here at the conference today.

It takes just 3 ½ months for this many people to be killed on our roads.

Look around.

In just 3 ½ months, that is by November this year, this is the unnecessary loss of life.

In Just 3 ½ months!

That is the reality of the road toll.

And that does not include serious injuries.

Each and every day we can expect serious injuries to be inflicted on about 60 people due to road crashes.

When put in those terms, at a conference like this, you can only agree that morally and economically we cannot allow this carnage to continue.

Unfortunately, in the “real world” that agreement doesn’t exist.

In the “real world” road crashes are seen by much of the community as being inevitable.

Every day, we weigh up the risk of having a crash with the enormous benefits of flexible, quick and reasonably inexpensive car travel. And the car wins. The risks are very low, but why should ordinary people who make an ordinary mistake be killed or injured?

We believe that poor road safety is a result of the behaviour of “other drivers” – people speed, truck drivers who don’t get enough rest, stupid people drink. We think “those behaviours are difficult things to change; people will always do them.”

So, road crashes become inevitable as does associated injury or death..

When I was preparing this presentation, I came across an interesting anecdote. In 1895, there were only 4 petrol cars in the USA. 2 of them were in St Louis, and those 2 cars managed to crash into one another. Both drivers were injured. (Source: Smith, 2000).

Given the historical context, it’s not surprising that we think crashes are inevitable – ever since we first sat behind the wheel of a car, we’ve had crashes and injuries. It something that generations of Australians have grown up with.

But we haven’t always thought that an untimely death is inevitable. In the past, we decided that death from tetanus, whooping cough or measles was unacceptable. We **invested** in improving water supply, sewerage systems, food quality and health education, and as a result people started living longer. We found the money to invest, to make the changes, to prevent the deaths.

Today, the word “preventable” is part of our every day language. We try to prevent death from heart disease through better health policy, we are investing resources to prevent death from terrorism, and both major political parties have been talking about preventable measures for reducing childhood obesity.

We don't as a community accept workplace deaths and injury as something to blame the employee for. We have OH&S legislation to ensure the infrastructure is safe.

But still, the feeling that road crashes and associated injury and death are inevitable lingers on.

This situation is far from universal. Despite already having one of the lowest road fatality rates in the world, the Swedish Parliament decided in 1997 that they could do more. They established a policy of Vision Zero, which says that if a person is driving a 4 star car, then there should be nothing about the road that they're driving on that will mean they will die or be seriously injured in the event of a crash.

Quoting from the records, the Swedish Parliament said at the time:

it can never be ethically acceptable that people are killed or seriously injured when moving within the road transport system;

life and health can never be exchanged for other benefits within the society; and

whenever someone is killed or seriously injured, necessary steps must be taken to avoid a similar event.

It is interesting to speculate on whether Government's plan to upgrade the Pacific Highway in NSW to dual carriageway by 2016 would hold if this policy, which requires that “*necessary steps must be taken to avoid a similar event*” were adopted here. With 69 deaths having occurred in the last 16 months on that road alone, I suspect the upgrade would be completed a lot sooner.

Creating the sort of change in the way that people think about road safety, so that what Sweden has done becomes possible here, is what the *SaferRoads* project is about.

It's about getting a network of people and organisations together to get people – motorists, the wider community, politicians – thinking differently about road safety.

We want to dispel the myth that road crashes and associated injury or death are inevitable.

We want to pose road safety not as just a narrow transport issue, but one that effects all facets of our lives.

Road safety is a preventable health issue, and should be thought of as such.

We need to raise public interest and awareness and put policy makers on notice that the status quo is not good enough.

The Commonwealth and the States could learn a valuable lesson from local government, and take a whole of government approach to road safety.

At the Commonwealth level, Road Safety is not just an issue for the Minister for Transport or the Minister for Roads. The whole of Government should be involved, The Prime Minister, The Health Minister, The Workplace Relations Minister, The Minister for Finance, The Minister for Families and the Minister for Youth Affairs.

SaferRoads advocates such a systems approach to road safety. Have a look at our booth outside to get some further information but it is basically about safer drivers in safer cars on safer roads.

For a long time, we have had an unbalanced approach. We have spent a lot of time drilling into motorists the behavioural issues. Motorists can, without hesitation, list the main behavioural causes of crashes: speeding, alcohol and fatigue. Most know something of vehicle safety: airbags or abs. Cars will become “safer”. Look at the simple devices in the TAC Safe Car on display. 1000’s of cars with these devices are being tried across the world.

However, beyond knowing that divided roads are safer than two lane roads, few have an understanding of what makes a safe road.

And even more concerning, few realise or appreciated the number of people killed or injured every day on our roads.

Even fewer realise that road crashes cost the community more than \$40 million every day.

It is up to us to ensure they know the facts.

It is only through community leadership that we will be able to see a change in focus.

According to the research, fixing the roads has a greater potential to save lives than most people think. The Federal Government’s National Road Safety Strategy estimates that by 2010 around 332 lives could be saved each year through improved roads, 175 because of safer vehicles, 158 by better driver behaviour and 35 by the use of new technology.

You shouldn’t die from making a simple mistake on our roads. Our infrastructure needs to be designed with safety at the forefront.

It’s usually the road infrastructure that leads directly to death. For example, one in 4 people die because they hit a roadside object.

Now I don't suggest that this type of thinking is completely missing in Australia – the fact that we're here talking about it suggests its not. But we need more of it.

Take for example the recent House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport and Regional Services Inquiry report “Eyes on the Road Ahead”, which made 38 recommendations on ways to make our roads safer.

Most of the recommendations are simple, based on common sense and require little or no new expenditure. The committee recommended including injury data as well as fatality data in national statistics so we can see the full road safety picture. They also recommended setting nationally consistent benchmarks for safety performance, a national coordination of safety campaigns, and government fleet policies that encourage the purchase of safer vehicles.

Perhaps not a full “systems approach”, not quite a Vision Zero as in Sweden, and not quite a whole of Government approach, but certainly steps in the right direction.

Perhaps most importantly, the report represents a real opportunity for politicians from all parties to reinvigorate the debate in Australia, to pose road safety not as a luxury item, but as an imperative.

This is not something new that we're calling for. In 1972, in a report to the then Minister for Transport Peter Nixon, the Expert Group on Road Safety said:

Road accidents are rarely caused by a single factor. They represent the failures in the ... system involving the vehicle, the road environment, the road user and his social environment. (Source, Smith, 2000).

We have known for a long time what the issues are, but we've chosen to spend a lot of time on a single component of the system - the road user. Politicians owe it the families and friends the 84,926 people who have died on the roads since the 1972 report, to broaden the debate, to take on the recommendations of this year's “Eyes on the Road Ahead Report”.

But in stark contrast to strong announcement made by the Swedish Parliament in 1997, all parties to date have been silent on the report. None criticised it, none praised it. The Committee Chairman was left to manage one day of media interest, primarily over a recommendation for further training of 4wd vehicle drivers.

It seems that the old-fashioned idea that deaths and injuries on the road are inevitable lingers on.

While we wait for parliament to resume in August, almost 200 will die from road crashes and as many as 2,500 will suffer serious injury.

The cost to Australia will be well over \$1bn.

And we owe to those victims to advocate for road safety. As part of the *SaferRoads* project we will be building a network of organisations keen to makes our roads safer.

Our clubs will continue to conduct research into driver training, road infrastructure and vehicle safety.

We will continue to promote vehicle crashworthiness through the Australian New Car Assessment Program. Cars are becoming more crashworthy, look before you buy.

As is shown on the slide, we are also developing the Australian Road Assessment Program, AusRAP, which will rate the nations roads according to the risk of crashing, and their ability to reduce the likelihood of death or injury in the event of a crash.

We are calling on you to get involved in *SaferRoads*, to take your existing work and broaden it out.

To share with us your knowledge and expertise.

To promote road safety as more than just a narrow transport issue.

To encourage your constituents to take an active role in demanding that road safety be given the prominence it deserves.

This will be the showcase of best practice which will have real effect.

Car crashes and associated death and injury are not inevitable.

The National Road Safety Target calls for a 40% reduction in road deaths by 2010, 700 lives out of 1700. As we in the AAA learnt from our recent polling when people think about this they inevitably say, “what about the other 1000 per year. What will you do about them?”

The Commonwealth and States must then follow the lead of local governments and take a broader approach to road safety.

To be silent, to ignore the challenge, for us all and our leaders, must not be an option.

Every step will save valuable lives and unnecessary injuries every day.
Thank you for your attention, I look forward to working with you.