Crossroads

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TRANSPORTATION Information Center

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New work for county safety commissions

County traffic safety commissions have been around for nearly 25 years—with varying degrees of activity and effectiveness. Now WisDOT is looking to them to help carry out the federal ISTEA mandate for local safety management systems. Coordinating the effort is Jerry Smith, community traffic safety program manager at WisDOT. "The commissions are ideal for this purpose," says Smith. "They already exist and bring together all the disciplines which are involved in safety at the local level."

Since they were created in 1971, the commissions were supposed to meet quarterly; keep an accident location system; and be a focal point for safety programs, for reviewing unsafe roads or intersections, and for recommending ways to address the problems. "Some work in a perfunctory way while others are very active," says Smith, who has been attending many of the meetings around the state.

The commissions can be very helpful to small and large municipalities who have to address unpopular or expensive safety decisions. As an unbiased review group, they can make a recommendation that is politically difficult for the local officials. For example, citizens often react to a crash or injury by demanding a stop sign, a traffic signal or lower speed on a section of

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Reviewing crashes is one of the jobs of County Traffic Safety Commissions

Keeping local roads safe

Sometimes it takes major reconstruction or expensive equipment to improve local road safety. Adding traffic or railroad crossing signals or rebuilding hazardous intersections, narrow roads or deficient bridges can be costly.

However, safety can also be significantly improved by paying attention to many smaller details. For example, checking signs, shoulders and guardrail, and mowing or brushing roadsides to improve vision can add important safety margins for drivers.

Inspecting and maintaining highway signs, and especially replacing critical missing signs, are major responsibilities of local streets and highway agencies.

Keeping them up can help prevent serious crashes.

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Keeping local roads safe

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This drop-off is over five inches deep and is a hazard. Drop-offs commonly occur along the inside of curves and at intersections.

Beam guardrail will deflect several feet before it restrains a vehicle. This installation is dangerous. Also, there does not appear to be a good reason to install guardrail at this location.

This rail is too low and could cause a vehicle to roll over. A minimum height of 27 in. to the top of the rail is recommended. Also, the blunt end can be hazardous. In addition, the intermediate posts are missing. Posts should be spaced at six feet three inches apart. Upgrading the guardrail is desirable if it is to be effective.

Severe drop-offs at the edge of pavements are also a hazard. Drop-offs as small as two inches can be a hazard for high speed traffic. They can occur when the pavement is overlaid and additional shoulder material is needed to match the new road cross-section. Traffic or water action can also cause shoulder drop-offs.

Routine inspections can spot hazardous shoulder drop-offs. You'll often find them along the inside of curves and at intersections where traffic is running near the edge of the pavement or off on the shoulder. Repair them by grading existing gravel back up to meet the pavement edge or adding more shoulder gravel.

Guardrail can effectively shield the motorist from roadside hazards, but the guardrail can become a hazard itself if it is improperly installed and maintained. For example, the area between the pavement and the guardrail is intended to be level and free of obstacles. Watch for and remove excess gravel, windrows of gravel, soil or other material, and snowbanks.

Inspect guardrails routinely. Those which are at the wrong height or in the wrong place, or which have blunt ends won't provide the safety they are intended to give. In fact, they are hazards. For example, guardrail is intended to deflect or bend about three feet during a crash. Make sure there is at least three feet of clearance between the guardrail and the hazard it is shielding.

Maintain your guardrail. Check the posts on beam guardrail and repair or replace those that are rotted or not completely imbedded. It doesn't work unless it has proper support. Guardrail that is corroded or missing hardware won't function properly either. Some improvements can be low cost; others may require completely removing or upgrading the guardrail systems.

The T.I.C. will address roadside safety improvement at its January safety workshops. We are also working on developing information manuals to help you inspect roadways for critical safety improvements. These manuals will provide a rating and priority selection system to help local officials in budgeting and in setting priorities for roadside improvements.

Short portions of rail are not as effective or able to restrain a large vehicle as longer ones. The guardrail in the bottom photo seems to be needed. Both need repair and are a hazard in their current conditions.

County safety commissions

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road. The commission can review the applicable traffic safety regulations and advise on whether the request is appropriate.

"Often they will go out to the site themselves or have their staff do a study to find the best answer," says Smith.

A committee organized by WisDOT is looking into how to meet the ISTEA safety management requirements. They sent a survey out to commissions in late spring to see how they function and what changes, if any, are needed. The results, due back in late August, will guide the next phase of the project. The system is supposed to be in place by late 1996.

"I think that among other things we'll want to encourage more use of the commissions," says Smith. "In some counties they have sort of been forgotten." He'd also like to see them use state-generated crash reports more.

You can reach your county highway safety commission through the county highway safety coordinator or sheriff.