



Safer Drivers in Safer Vehicles on Safer Roads: An Invitation to Action



Canadian Automobile Association
1145 Hunt Club Road, Suite 200
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1V 0Y3
Tel: (613) 247-0117
Fax: (613) 247-0118
www.caa.ca

September 2004

I. The State of Canada's Roads and Highways ... A Need for Action

Canada is a vast country with both densely populated centres and small communities - many in isolated, remote areas. Even so, the sense of community that Canadians have from coast to coast has been built and sustained, no matter the distance, through their ability to safely and efficiently reach any part of their large country regardless of the time of year. Our geographical expanse coupled with limited transportation choices means Canadians rely heavily on private motor vehicles as their primary mode of transportation. With about 19 million registered vehicles and approximately 21 million licensed drivers, Canadians are among the most mobile people in the world and roads and highways are an important part of their daily lives.

This mobility is in large part due to an intricate and interconnected web of roads and highways, 900,000 kilometres in length, which transports people, goods and services to all areas of the country. Canada's National Highway System (NHS), which includes the Trans-Canada and other major roads, is the backbone of Canada's transportation system. Carrying about one-quarter of our nation's traffic, and accounting for approximately three per cent of our 900,000 kilometre road network, the NHS is comprised of 3,300 kilometres of freeways, 2,700 kilometres of multi-lane arterials, 17,800 kilometres of two-lane paved highways and 600 kilometres of two-lane gravel highways. It extends from coast to coast, connects all provincial capital cities and all major population and commercial centres, shipping and ferry terminals, and major access points to the United States of America.

Roads and highways are the number one mover of people, goods and services; therefore, Canadians expect them to be efficient, navigable and, above all, safe.

Our mobility is declining and our safety is becoming increasingly at risk, however, in the face of reduced federal investment in our roads and highways, especially at a time of growing demand for this critical strategic asset. In addition, for the past two decades, the National Highway System has not been modernized because of the lack of a national strategic action plan to have it maintained to world-class standards.

As a result, new roadway construction and upgrades have continued to lag behind population and economic growth, pushing this important resource to the breaking point: We are now facing a serious crisis – Canadians are taking

more road trips; freight traffic is growing as Canada's businesses compete globally; border-crossings are jammed; congestion is on the rise; the quality of our roads and highways is deteriorating, leading to more dangerous roadways for Canadians to navigate.

Our country deserves *much* better.

In its December 1996 report to Parliament, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport recognized the urgency of the issue:

An efficient, competitive highway system is one of the fundamental requirements of a healthy economy. It has demonstrated beyond any doubt how important a safe and competitive highway transportation system is to trade and tourism. The Committee believes the need and urgency are clear. No further discussion or study is required. The Committee is convinced that time is of the essence. We can launch ourselves on a program of highway renewal and reap the benefits of a more efficient, safer (NHS) or we can delay and watch it decline to the point where we will be forced to pay higher costs for highway rehabilitation in the future. What is required is that the federal government recognizes the NHS as a national system of strategic importance in support of international and inter-provincial trade and tourism and for the good functioning of the Canadian economic union. It is the Committee's strong view that the federal government should take a leadership role in creating in cooperation with the provinces and territories, a framework that will ensure that the NHS is properly, maintained, restored and upgraded.¹

The Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) agrees wholeheartedly.

CAA is Canada's premier traffic safety and advocacy organization for motorists and travellers, representing approximately 4.5 million members through eleven provincial and regional clubs.

Traffic safety is and always has been a primary concern for CAA, and we continue to work diligently to protect motorists and travellers. CAA, for example, is firmly committed to Canada's *Road Safety Vision 2010*, the national undertaking aimed at making our national roads and highways the safest in the world.

CAA is pleased to take part in the Government of Canada's pre-budget consultations by presenting this preliminary submission. The principal objective of this submission is to urge the Government of Canada to shift its thinking about roadways and roadway infrastructure funding from a narrow 'transport' policy issue to one of traffic and road safety as a preventable national public health issue.

II. Road Safety ... a very real health issue for Canadians

In 2001, according to Transport Canada statistics, 2,778 road users were killed in traffic collisions and almost 17,000 suffered serious injuries, requiring hospitalization for at least 24 hours. Almost 224,000 road users – about 600 per day – suffered some form of physical injury.²

The suffering caused by road crashes is enormous – for every victim, there are family members, friends, colleagues and communities who must cope with the physical and psychological consequences of the death, injury or disability of a loved one. Crash survivors must often cope with the long-term, painful consequences of injury, disability and rehabilitation. The suffering is in itself a reason to remain vigilant, but the societal costs are also significant. In Canada, estimates of economic losses caused by traffic collisions are at least \$10 billion annually – about 1 per cent of Canada's GDP, and as high as \$25 billion.³

Because of a concerted effort, Canada's traffic safety record has improved dramatically over the past twenty years. Since 1984, traffic fatalities have decreased by 33% and serious injuries have declined by 35%. Despite these improvements, traffic fatalities and injuries continue to be a major transportation problem. In the short term, this is not expected to change.

Unlike many other national jurisdictions, however, traffic and roadway safety in Canada is not recognized as a national public health challenge. One reason for this has been the tendency for traffic safety to be seen as the focus of a single federal government department – namely, Transport Canada. Policies and actions stemming from this governmental organization have focused, for the most part, on education, research, motor vehicle safety regulations and some enforcement. In addition, for the past two decades, decision-makers have been locked into a narrow debate about the funding, support and nature of Canada's overall transportation policy.

As a result, the health and safety-related benefits of enhanced roadways has been widely overlooked. This policy oversight is inconsistent with the government's national traffic safety strategy - *Road Safety Vision 2010*, which calls for a 30% decrease in the average number of road users killed or seriously injured by 2010.

When it comes to our roadways, the health and safety of Canadians should be our government's number one priority. There is thus an urgent need to broaden the federal policy approach to traffic safety, with national public health playing more of an instrumental role. In many instances, crashes are preventable when driving on safer, more forgiving roads. An early investment in road safety would thus yield a greater return on the public health ledger by reducing and preventing death and injury from collisions in the first place.

Road safety as a national public health challenge

There exists already an international movement to recognize road safety as a public health issue. On April 7, this year, World Health Day was sponsored by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank. It was dedicated to the theme of road safety, in an attempt to encourage the nations of the world to increase investment in traffic safety initiatives and to stimulate a multidisciplinary approach in tackling traffic safety challenges.

The *World Report on Road Traffic Injury Prevention* published by WHO and the World Bank concluded that traffic safety is a major but neglected global health problem, requiring concerted governmental efforts for effective and sustainable prevention. In dealing with this challenge, WHO advocates a multidisciplinary approach that looks at the interactions between road users, vehicles and roadway infrastructure. Furthermore, the report also concluded that the health sector is a critical partner in this process and can strengthen the evidence base, provide appropriate care and rehabilitation, conduct advocacy and awareness, and contribute to the development, implementation and evaluation of interventions. This approach has been adopted widely in many countries, including Australia, Finland, France and the United States of America. It would be wise for Canadian decision-makers to follow the example of these nations.

To better understand this multidisciplinary approach, it is helpful to compare it to the basic underpinnings of health research and treatment. For centuries, scientists, health practitioners and, more recently, public policy analysts have clearly understood the importance of examining three critical factors in coping with the outbreak of communicable diseases: the patient, the medium of disease transmission and the environment. Because of this approach we have learned to successfully control infectious diseases that once seemed impossible to understand, much less treat. And just as we conquered many diseases by focussing on the patient, the medium of transmission, and the

environment, it is time for us to address roadway fatalities and injuries in the same way.

Transferring this three-prong approach to traffic safety, we can focus on three critical aspects of vehicular crashes: the driver, the vehicle and the roadway. A life-saving and injury-preventing national road safety strategy predicated on three components is critical: *safer drivers in safer vehicles on safer roads*.

Safer Drivers in Safer Vehicles ... But What About Safer Roads?

We recognize that the federal government, in cooperation with provincial, territorial and municipal governments, has already done excellent work on the issue of *safer drivers*. Both laws and education on seatbelts, impaired driving, speeding, fatigue, and driving distractions have all made us, as road users, more aware of our responsibility for making roadways safer. These efforts of examining human factors, such as driver behaviour, will continue to be necessary to encourage drivers to drive responsibly, and governments and stakeholders have worked admirably on this front.

Vehicle manufacturers also have a role to play in the design and production of *safer vehicles*. Safer vehicles have saved lives through better structural design and safety features like airbags, anti-lock braking, and responsive seat belts. Government regulators work with industry partners to ensure that safety standards are set and complied with to protect the travelling public to the maximum extent possible. Again, government and industry have come together to tackle important vehicle safety issues, and we applaud these efforts.

Now, we ask that the federal government recognize the third important factor: *Safer roads*.

The importance of creating a safe road environment, an environment more *tolerant* and *forgiving* of error, cannot be emphasized enough. Motorists should be able to travel on Canada's road system in safety, knowing that the features of the road itself, such as sharp bends, will not cause them to lose control. Roadways must be of a standard that the likelihood of a crash is significantly reduced and, for those crashes that do occur, the roadway and the immediate roadside environment, is more tolerant and forgiving, making crashes survivable.

There is huge potential to reduce fatalities and injuries through enhanced capacity and better road design and maintenance. Road safety features and standards are closely linked to crash rates and it is clear that well founded

improvements to roadway infrastructure will have a direct correlation on the fatalities and injuries. In its 1998 report, the Council of Ministers Responsible for Transportation and Highway Safety estimated that reduced congestion and improved highway standards could be expected to reduce the number of fatalities by as many as 247 and injuries by up to 16,000 each year.⁴ This potential benefit is staggering, and must not be overlooked.

In its report, the Council clearly recognized that the integral part of achieving better safety of the National Highway System is through improving standards of design and construction. Equally important are appropriate maintenance regimes and capacity. Regrettably, the quality and safety of roadways in Canada is not given a public policy priority. Given the ambitious target of a 30% reduction in fatalities and injuries contained in the *Road Safety Vision 2010* document and making our roads the safest in the world, we risk setting ourselves up for failure if measures are not taken quickly to upgrade and improve our roads and highways to be as safe as possible.

In the United States, travel on highways, particularly interstate highways, is often safer than travel on other roads because of the high design standards imposed during construction and maintenance phases. As a result, the fatality rate for interstate highways is nearly 60 per cent lower than the rest of the system, and the injury rate is 70 per cent lower on interstate highways than on the rest of the system. An estimated 6,100 fatalities and 440,000 injuries were avoided in 1994 through the use of interstate highways.⁵

These statistics reinforce the point that good design and safety-related operational practices can be incorporated into Canada's roadway system, in particular the National Highway System.

By taking on the issue of safer roads as a health concern, and as a priority for *Road Safety Vision 2010*, the federal and provincial governments would realize significant cost savings to our healthcare system from having to treat crash victims. The reduction of traffic fatalities and injuries should therefore be regarded as a public health opportunity rather than an unfortunate but "acceptable" risk of driving on our roads.

The safety and well being of the motoring public is paramount. Timely, appropriate preventative measures are needed to ensure that many of the injuries and fatalities do not occur in the first place. Visiting friends and family, driving to the mall to do some shopping, or going to work, getting to one's destination and back safely is an undertaking we should be able to engage in safely. Similarly, using our roads for commerce, for work, or for

leisure by tourists, places us all in jeopardy if the roads we are driving on could result in unnecessary injury or death.

An immediate investment and strategic policy development is needed to improve the safety of Canada's roads and highways to that enjoyed by citizens in such countries as Great Britain, Sweden, and the Netherlands. Despite having made progress in making our roads and highways safer, Canada still compares less favourably with these best performing countries in the world and more needs to be done to upgrade our performance.

The prevention of death and injury on our highways will reduce the burden on our already strained healthcare system. It will reduce the intangible grief and mourning of those whose friends and families have suffered losses while travelling on our roadways. While the risks associated with road use will never be reduced to zero, the Government of Canada should invest sufficient funds in our roadways to instil confidence that our loved-ones will arrive at their destinations safely.

III. Our Preliminary Proposal ... a need to act now

What we must realize is that roads and highways are the core of Canada's transportation system and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future. It is, therefore, hard to accept that the most vital part of this strategic asset has not received widespread attention – or funding – by federal decision makers. In fact, Canada is one of the few industrialized countries that does not have a national policy for its roads and highways, and is virtually alone in not having significant federal government funding in support of national roads and highways infrastructure. The lack of a coordinated planning and long-term funding commitment has manifested itself in the substandard condition and capacity of Canadian roadways. And this is resulting in roadways that are, at best, congested and inefficient and are, at worst, unsafe and a potential health risk for Canadians.

As years roll on, there is a widening gap between what is invested in this vital infrastructure and what needs to be invested in it to offset the increasing deterioration of our roads and highways. As mentioned, this decline does not simply make Canadians roads and highways less enjoyable to drive, or more difficult to move goods about the country, but actually makes them a liability to the health and safety of many Canadians each year.

To address the health and safety shortcomings of our crumbling highway infrastructure, CAA proposes urgent action beyond the token assurances that the government has made in recent times.

In the February 2004 *Speech from the Throne*, the Government of Canada set forth a vision to overcome the challenges of infrastructure renewal for cities and communities across the country. We are encouraged by this commitment as well as the Prime Minister's efforts to provide support with "a new deal that targets the infrastructure needed to support quality of life and sustainable growth."

In his inaugural Budget on March 23, 2004, Finance Minister Ralph Goodale made the following commitment: "The GST/HST relief measure advances the New Deal's objectives.... It provides a significant contribution for the funding of critical infrastructure priorities such as roads, modern transit and clean water."

This pledge, although commendable, does not provide a specific commitment to the very serious and urgent issue of Canada's deteriorating roads and highways. Immediate funding to address existing deficiencies, coupled with a policy vision that provides for predictable maintenance, improvements, and construction, are urgently required.

Prime Minister Martin himself recognized this deficiency during the election campaign when he acknowledged that twinning the Trans-Canada highway was "an issue whose time has come." His party's election platform also contained a pledge dedicating a portion of gas tax revenue to support major infrastructure that will be in addition to the government's existing infrastructure programs.

CAA welcomes this federal policy focus; however a more balanced perspective must be maintained to ensure that this critical component of Canada's infrastructure – roads and highways – is not overlooked.

With the swearing-in of the new cabinet on July 20, 2004, the Prime Minister laid the foundation for such a roads and highway policy to take shape by:

- ✓ Creating a cabinet position of Minister of State (Infrastructure and Communities)
- ✓ Appointing a Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister with special emphasis on Rural Communities
- ✓ Appointing a Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport

To complement the work that is being done as part of the new deal for communities and renewed emphasis on health care for Canadians, and in

keeping with the Prime Minister's new way of doing government business in Canada, one that involves consultation and partnerships, CAA calls on the Prime Minister to act quickly by appointing a Parliamentary Secretary with special responsibilities for roads and highways to spearhead the following CAA recommendations:

- ✓ **The federal government should examine funding options, including redirecting federal gasoline excise tax revenues for Canada's national highway system, and establish sustainable funding for roads and highways;**
- ✓ **The federal government must develop a meaningful, long-term national roads and highways policy in cooperation with the provinces and territories that will identify short, medium and long-term priorities and develop common technical and safety standards across the country;**
- ✓ **The Prime Minister is urged to strike a National Consultative Committee on Road Safety to consider ways to include the concept of safer roads and highways as a critical component of Canada's Road Safety Vision 2010; and to develop and implement a multidisciplinary approach to traffic safety, with the health sector playing a more prominent role.**

Over the years, CAA and other parties have consistently sought leadership and action by the Government of Canada on this issue. After at least two decades of neglect by the federal government, there is an urgent need for a renewed commitment to sustainable funding to ensure that our roads and highways do not fall further behind in safety, efficiency and effectiveness. CAA will continue to work in partnership with the federal government and other stakeholders to bring about positive change. The prevention of road injury or death should be an important component of our public health policy.

Our proposal is a first step toward setting the framework for the development of a strategic plan and commitment to long-term funding. After all, the cost of improving roads and highways in Canada will only increase in the future, especially with vehicle travel and population expected to increase over the years, which will add more vehicles to the road. We need this essential, additional road and highway funding now for mobility, safety and economic growth in the future. In fact, funding the expansion of infrastructure should be in place before increased demand from business and housing development places an even greater strain on access routes, leading to even greater health and safety hazards.

Conclusion

Canada is obviously in urgent need of a comprehensive framework for the development and implementation of a roads and highways policy, and sustained, investment in our NHS. The most important issue in which we can quickly ensure positive change is in developing better and safer roads and highways. Canada needs safer and better maintained roadways, as well as policy that will ensure that the needs of this national asset are met in the years to come. In February 2004, CAA commissioned a national public opinion survey to determine the views of Canadians on national transportation infrastructure and on funding for roads and highways. The survey found that 35% of Canadians believed their roads are in *poor* condition with another 28% saying they were simply adequate. Our roads and highways are simply not good enough for Canadians.⁶

It is crucial that Canadian motorists and other road-users receive a commitment from the federal government to develop a national roadway plan – in cooperation with the provinces and territories – and provide stable, long term funding to develop and sustain an integrated National Highway System for Canada.

As such, investment into our transportation system should not be viewed as competition for federal funding that would otherwise go to health care, but as complementary to this policy priority. The benefits of increased safety flowing from an enhanced and improved highway infrastructure would provide the federal government with additional resources from savings in other expenditures such as healthcare and disability benefits.

Given the importance that Canadians in general, and motorists in particular, place in maintaining and preserving our motor traffic infrastructure, it is easy to be discouraged by the low priority that the federal government currently gives our roads and highways. Much is at stake beyond the responsible use of excise taxes levied on fuel. Safety, the economy, cultural and social ties to the land and its people demand that the physical infrastructure be given the necessary resources to preserve our way of life and keep us internationally competitive with respect to economic markets.

Specifically, the benefits from a first class roadway system would include a reduction in fatalities and injuries from collisions, making this an obvious health benefit. Long term, sustainable investment in transportation is crucial to many other areas, as well. For example, investing in roadway infrastructure will result in safety benefits for motorists; productivity and economic gains, trade and international competitiveness, and increased tourism and better

protection of the environment. These factors combined would in turn enhance Canadians standard of living and make us the envy of the world.

¹ *The Renewal of the National Highway System*, House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, December 1996, p.7.

² Road Safety Vision 2010 – Making Canada’s Roads the Safest in the World, Annual Report 2002, Transport Canada and the Canadian Council of Motor Transport Administrators.

³ Road Safety Vision 2010, Annual Report 2002.

⁴ *National Highway Policy for Canada*, Council of Ministers Responsible for Transportation and Highway Safety, September 1998.

⁵ American Automobile Association, 2003.

⁶ *Report on Public Opinion Research Findings*, Prepared by Earnscliffe Research and Communications, 2004.