

January 16, 2005 Sunday

FIX THE LAWS

OUR POSITION: LAWMAKERS HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO MAKE FLORIDA'S ROADS SAFER

Stunned by a record number of traffic deaths in the region this past year, a host of local leaders -- from law-enforcement officials to transportation planners -- are moving in lockstep with immediate plans to stem the carnage.

But they can't go it alone. Their efforts, which include a regional dialogue, better law enforcement, safer bus stops and more rapid improvements to the region's most deadly roads, certainly should help. But to really save lives, state lawmakers need to focus on the issue with equal vigor. And Central Florida 's legislative delegation should be leading that charge.

As a recent Sentinel series revealed, Central Florida is home to one of the most dangerous thoroughfares in the nation: State Road 50. But the problem hardly is isolated to Orange County. Alarming high death rates occurred on major roads in Miami-Dade, Pasco, Pinellas and Monroe counties, as well, the Sentinel analysis found.

Every lawmaker in the state should be actively engaged in the search for solutions. And the answers needn't be expensive. In fact, safer streets could even save taxpayers money.

Consider, for example:

Seat-belt safety. For decades, lawmakers have rebuffed opportunities to give law officers the legal tools they need to enforce state seat-belt laws. As it now stands, police can pull over and ticket motorists who litter. But they can't pull over a motorist who is not buckled up. The driver has to commit another traffic infraction first. That's absurd. Not only do seat belts save lives, data from other states with primary-enforcement laws show an 11 percent to 15 percent increase in the number of motorists who buckle up. Some complain that minority motorists would be targeted. Not if they buckled up. Others say it impinges on personal freedoms. Not when the public pays more than \$250 a year in increased insurance premiums and taxes to care for those injured in traffic accidents. Gov. Jeb Bush supports the bill this year. The Legislature should, too.

Red-light running. Increased traffic congestion and frustrated motorists have caused a near epidemic of red-light running in recent years. Yet Florida still classifies the violation as a "non-criminal traffic infraction," even if a red-light runner kills or maims someone. Red-light runners should be considered reckless drivers and be criminally prosecuted if injuries or deaths result. Fines are outrageously low, too, with a state minimum of \$65. Doubling the fine is in order. The proceeds could help offset cash-strapped hospital trauma centers that treat crash victims.

Red-light cameras. Law-enforcement officials need this tool to catch red-light runners. But Florida law doesn't allow the automated cameras. Once again, lawmakers cite "privacy" concerns. That's nothing but a canard. A motorist on a public street has no legal expectation of privacy. If motorists don't want their picture taken, they shouldn't run red lights.

Motorcycle insurance. Incredibly, Florida law also allows motorcycle owners to ride without personal-injury insurance -- even though a motorcycle accident is 16 times more likely to result in death than a car crash. Yes, the law requires motorcycle owners to have at least \$10,000 in liability insurance. But most don't get it because they can buy and ride a motorcycle without proof of insurance -- unlike car owners. The same rules that apply to car owners should be required of motorcyclists.

These common-sense policy changes could save hundreds of lives a year -- if not thousands. It's a matter of public safety that lawmakers no longer can ignore.

Central Florida roads claimed a record number of lives last year

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
(preliminary)						
Lake	47	59	61	71	72	67
Orange	153	153	169	164	169	184
Osceola	50	55	52	74	56	69
Seminole	40	38	44	33	24	62
Volusia	86	80	96	112	91	132
Brevard	81	76	79	113	87	77
Polk	123	125	111	127	116	137

Source: Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles