

ENVIRONMENT

Road widening not the only way to save lives

Safe and Scenic Toodyay Road

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RECENT editions of *The Toodyay Herald* have been full of news about serious road accidents in our community which have included loss of life.

These have impacted many people in our community as well as our economy.

In an ideal world of limitless resources we would spend as much as it takes to prevent such accidents.

In the December *Herald* Main Roads WA, as part of its full-page information piece on the Improvements to Toodyay Road, seems to be supporting such unlimited spending by saying: "... our goal is that no one shall die or suffer life changing injuries as a result of a crash".

The reality is otherwise – resources are limited and rationed.

Governments at all levels make decisions about how resources are allocated and this includes putting a finite cost on human lives.

So how can we reduce the road toll in ways that are commensurate with our limited resources?

And most importantly, those limitations extend beyond money to concern for our fragile, disappearing, natural environment.

In the February *Herald* Bob Neville, wearing his RoadWise hat, makes a pitch for state governments to contribute to improve deteriorating local roads, with increasing traffic, that currently rely on limited local government funds.

The Safe and Scenic Toodyay Roads (SASTR) campaign supports road improvements particularly when they can be achieved without



The Toodyay Bindi Bindi Road. Feeder roads can have unrestricted speed limits regardless of road safety conditions. Photo: Mark Roy

excessive road widening or significant loss of roadside vegetation, for example with hard shoulders and rumble strips.

As we have repeatedly said, the improvements to the metropolitan section of Toodyay Road are a perfect example of these effective but environmentally sensitive improvements.

Another example of modest but effective changes is on the Toodyay section of the Toodyay-Clackline Road.

SASTR agrees with Mr Neville's suggestion that perhaps some of the money from our "resources boom" should trickle down to local

roads given the heavy traffic some now carry.

But SASTR has trouble accepting the only way to reduce the road toll is to widen all local roads.

A broader range of solutions is required as people are still being killed or injured on roads that have been more than adequately re-engineered and improved.

Some 70 per cent of crashes are due to vehicles running off the road.

Readers may recall WA Road Safety Commissioner Adrian Warner lamenting the high road toll in WA last Christmas, attributing

many of the fatal and serious crashes to human behaviour – be it speeding, tiredness, mobile phone use or failing to wear seat belts.

Not a word was said about poor roads.

In his article Mr Neville rightly highlights the issue of unrestricted speed limits that exist on many of our local roads, some of which such as the Toodyay – Bindi Bindi Road are indeed carrying heavy traffic.

Parts of this road and many other local roads are unsuitable for 110 km/h speeds.

In a utopian world we would find the money to improve all these roads according to the engineering standards that Mr Neville indicates are required.

This cannot happen due to aforementioned economic constraints.

Instead, why not reduce the speed limit on sections of road where it is dangerous to speed?

This seems logical and we fail to see why it cannot be done more frequently.

The number of people killed or seriously injured on Toodyay Road fell in the last five years due to strategies including reduced speed limits, driver education campaigns, and an increased police presence.

Modifying driver behaviour must remain a key part of any strategy to reduce the road toll as indicated by the Road Safety Commissioner in his comments at Christmas time.

This includes addressing all contributing factors that cannot be ameliorated with wider roads.

Other solutions include renewing efforts to get road traffic back onto rail.

The Wheatbelt has a rail network but poor economic decisions by previous governments have led to the neglect and closure of many lines.

WA Labor promised to restore some rail lines although it remains unclear when that will happen.

If traffic is increasing at the rates claimed and the cost of injuries and deaths is the several million that RoadWise claims, then it should not be difficult to mount an economic case for more rail transport.

The environmental benefits of such transport are clear.

However, as with widening roads, no one strategy alone will address all of the problems, which is why we need a broader range of solutions.

What SASTR does not want is for the environment and in particular roadside vegetation to be sacrificed on the altar of excessive road engineering to reduce the road toll.