



BAHAMAS SOCIETY OF ENGINEERS (BSE)

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TRAFFIC CRASHES AND FATALITIES

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For the past four years in The Bahamas the traffic fatality totals average 60 persons per annum. This is an average of 60 persons perishing on our roadways each year. This year during the first quarter, the traffic fatality count is 12. To say that there is a major challenge ahead is an understatement. If the country lost 60 passengers a year on our national airline Bahamasair, the public outcry would be far reaching and deafening.

The country's challenge could therefore be put in perspective by looking comparatively at the region. In the Bahamas the fatals per 100,000 population averaged approximately 20 per year for the past four years. During that period in Barbados that figure was approximately 9, in Jamaica it was 13, and in the United States it was 15.

The Bahamas Society of Engineers also notes that a travel advisory was issued on The Bahamas informing visitors from countries such as the United States, Britain, and Canada that the leading cause of death among travelers to the Bahamas are traffic crashes. Both visitors and residents are meeting their demise on our roadways at an unacceptable rate. This translates to a substantial financial burden on the country taking into account impacts such as lost wages, medical, insurance expenses, and negative international media exposure.

The challenge to reduce the fatalities and crashes on our roadways is not insurmountable. However, it has to be approached with a clear appreciation of the contributing factors that affect traffic crashes. These factors include: the human factor, the vehicle, the road, prevailing conditions and the environment, and the institutional and social factors.

Any approach to address the situation should be holistic in nature, and must address these five key factors through a sustained effort. These initiatives must be appropriately funded and moved forward through long-term public/private cooperation and partnerships. The focus and funding of this initiative should have a minimum project life of 10 years. Each year the effort and focus should be to improve road safety by modifying driver behavior on our roadway. This is achieved through engineering, education, enforcement, and institutionalization such that bad habits are unfrozen, changed or modified, and then refrozen.

POSITIONS

The positions of BSE as it relates to any road safety initiatives are as follows:

1. Incorporate engineering to direct interventions in the roadway network to identify critical roadway geometry, areas to be signed and marked accordingly, traffic signal operations, installation of devices that would reduce the frequency of crashes, asphalt resurfacing to enhance skid resistance, and efficient collection of crash data for analysis. Additionally, driver and pedestrian behavior, vehicle characteristics, and traffic norms and regulations should be researched and studied.
2. Incorporate a sustained public educational program that effectively utilizes public relation campaigns designed to notify and inform. The public relations program should seek to: reinforce good driving behavior, highlight what is legal and illegal driving behavior, enhance awareness through radio and television media, and increase the professional skills of road safety officials by advance training, all with the goal to increase road safety and institutionalize good, safe, and courteous driving behavior.
3. Incorporate rigid enforcement and a zero tolerance policy as it relates to any traffic infraction on our roadway. Further, local research would confirm that a disproportionate number of crashes and fatalities on our roadways are effected by driving under the influence. A systemic and targeted intervention against those drunk drivers must be given due consideration and implemented.
4. Incorporate institutional and social factors that would seek to enhance road safety by reviewing holistically the traffic regulations and law enforcement to impact the driving culture. This would include but not be limited to the vehicle inspection process which must encompass inspection techniques that address the mechanical characteristics of each vehicle such as hydraulics, brakes, and tires.
5. Adequately train all prospective drivers through mandated defensive driving courses that begin at the grade school level. And most importantly address the culture that encourages the proclivity to drive aggressively, and/or drive while intoxicated with impunity.

CONCLUSION

The success in modifying driver behavior and institutionalizing a culture of good driving and safety habits is a task that requires a systemic and sustained approach. Moreover, the above measures taken into account should provide a means and avenue for the reduction of traffic fatalities and crashes on a yearly basis. However, to be effective any road safety initiative must be adequately funded and outfitted with the appropriate professionals.