

INQUIRY INTO YOUNG DRIVER SAFETY AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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Mr Geoff Corrigan MP
Chair
Staysafe Committee
Parliament of New South Wales
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000



Dear Mr Corrigan

YOUNG DRIVER SAFETY AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS INQUIRY

I refer to your letter dated 28 September 2007 requesting submissions to your inquiry into Young Driver Safety and Education Programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on this very important issue dealing with young drivers and their training. This submission has been prepared by Councillor Mal Marks, Chairman of the Local Traffic Committee and Richard Wheatley, Traffic Engineer for Greater Taree City Council.

Councillor Mal Marks and myself would be willing to discuss and expand on the submission at the public hearings should you wish us to.

If you have any other enquiries regarding this matter please contact me on 6592 5358.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. Wheatley", written in a cursive style.

**RICHARD WHEATLEY
TRAFFIC ENGINEER**

**STAYSAFE COMMITTEE INQUIRY
INTO
YOUNG DRIVER SAFETY AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

GREATER TAREE CITY COUNCIL'S SUBMISSION

This submission has been prepared by Greater Taree City Council's Councillor Mal Marks, Chairman of the Local Traffic Committee and Richard Wheatley, Traffic Engineer for the Staysafe's inquiry into Young Driver Safety and Education Programs.

Introduction

This submission will be focussing on the compliance of young drivers to the road rules and the need for all drivers, including the young and new drivers, to drive to the conditions of the road and the environment. It would be safe to assume that the majority of new drivers (young or not) know the road rules and how to fundamentally drive, as they have been required to complete and pass theoretical and practical tests on driving.

So why are so many young drivers having accidents, in which many of these accidents tragically result in injuries and death?

The short answer is that they are **not obeying the road rules**, they are **not considering other road users** and they are **not driving to the conditions**.

It is clear that while they may know and understand the requirements to be a driver they are unwilling to practice these requirements to be a safe road user for themselves and the rest of the community. It is also considered that the youth of today are more self-confident, assertive and knowledgeable than previous generations due to the increased access to information and an ever-evolving society that provides the youth with more power to determine aspects of their life. This situation results in young people being over confident of their abilities and their privileges to make their own decisions. This could have the consequence of young drivers making decisions on the road beyond their level of understanding, training and experience. Young drivers must be made aware that it is a privilege to hold a driver's licence not a right.

This submission will be promoting the need for learner drivers and new drivers to understand their responsibilities and the need for respect on the road. Additionally this submission will cover the excellent extra curriculum training that is done by schools and service clubs to improve and raise the awareness of road safety.

Responsibility

Road users need to understand that they have a responsibility to drive safely and obey the road rules, this relates to everyone including drivers young or old, pedestrians, bicycle riders, truckies and motorcyclists. If all road users took responsibility for their actions and drove in a responsible manner then many accidents would be avoided but why are people not more responsible on the roads? The answer to this question is very complex and behaviourists would have many answers on why people are not responsible on the road network.

We would put forward some reasons and possible solutions to this issue of responsibility. The first one is at the very start of most young peoples time behind the wheel of a car with the testing of people for both theory and practical driving. The timing of these tests and training period is usually during the last two years of high school during which the person is heavily involved in learning and exams for the Higher School Certificate. So it is likely that many young people learning to drive would see the driving tests just as another test to be learnt and passed, and perhaps not viewed as an information and skills that they will use for the rest of their lives. It is important to ensure that young learners know that the driving rules and skills are not for passing an exam for school subjects like English or economics but for their rest of their lives and if observed could save lives.

People need to be informed on how decisions are made about road rules and road facilities such as speed zones, parking restrictions, traffic calming devices, signposting, pavement markers. If people understood the process used by the road authorities and the guidelines that are used to determine the design of road, safety items and management of the traffic then there may be more compliance to the road rules. The other advantage is that people would understand how the road devices and rules are decided and if they believe that a change is needed then they can take responsibility to contact the road authority to find out why it is that way, plus promote their proposed change. This understanding may change some of the negative attitudes and behaviour people have to the roads and the rules.

A very important aspect of road safety is that all drivers take responsibility for their driving on the road network taking into account the road conditions, weather and the other road users. This responsibility is needed from all drivers and especially young drivers who are still learning the skill of driving. This responsibility must cover all areas from not driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs, safe driving and to just good manners on the road.

This understanding to take responsibility must start early even before young people start learning to driver, as children have a level of responsibility on and around roads. This encouragement to take responsibility should start early with heavy emphasis during the learning to drive period and continued through the life of a person.

Respect

The second part of being a safe road user is to have respect on the road network and that respect is for the conditions, road rules and the other road users.

If people had respect for the road rules and obeyed them even the ones that they do not agree with then the rate of accidents would decrease significantly. It is important for people, especially young drivers that even if they disagree or are angry at a road condition or situation that they must still respect it and obey it as they probably do not know why it is there. An example would be a speed limit on section of road where motorists may believe it should be higher and they travel above the speed limit as that is what they believe they should be allowed to travel at. However, they do not have all the details on the decision for that speed limit and would not know the reason for that speed limit, which could be there is roadside activities that require the speed limit to be lower to provide extra safety.

There is a desperate need for young drivers to respect other road users and their safety. Road users include everyone on the road network from pedestrians, other motorists, bicycle and motorcycle riders, trucks, buses and passengers in vehicles. This respect would have drivers being careful on the road, not driving close to other vehicles, not cutting in while changing lanes, accepting that other road users make mistakes, avoiding road rage, in general all aspects of driving. This respect that drivers should show to others is the same respect that drivers want from other road users to themselves.

Drivers need to drive to the conditions of the road and the weather, with the road conditions being if the road is sealed or gravel, the road surface condition (potholed, damaged, etc), the geography of the road (sharp curves, hilly, narrow, etc) and the weather and time of day conditions (fine, raining, fog, dark, etc). Any of the road condition combinations listed above would require drivers to drive the road differently, such as a lower speed on wet roads. It is very important that young drivers are taught to drive to the conditions by respecting the road and weather conditions. Greater Taree City Council has many kilometres of unsealed roads (gravel) which results in accidents involving single vehicles where the driver has travelled too fast for the conditions and this accident rate would be reduced if drivers slowed down on these slippery roads.

The negative comments parents and other drivers make about the roads and the road rules while driving with children and young drivers in the vehicle must have the long term effect on these children of giving the impression that the road rules are “wrong” and need not be complied with, especially if the drivers disobey them. Young drivers may even be conditioned to believe that many road rules are wrong or just stupid and they can ignore them as they have seen the people they have driven with over the years ignore them or at the least criticize the rules. The young drivers then take that same opinions and driving habits to their driving.

While people may criticize some (or many) of the road rules there are many hundreds or thousands of other road rules or situations that they are content with but of course do not comment on these acceptable areas. So young people get a distorted view of the road network and the rules that govern it, therefore it is important to inform young drivers that respect is needed on the roads and the road rules to ensure they drive in a safe manner even where you believe the rules are inappropriate and may wish to drive differently.

Training

Training is so important to ensuring young people are ready to drive on the road network in a safe and responsible manner. The current training is covering the technical side of driving but needs to be expanded to cover the attitude issues that are discussed in the above sections. If the attitudes of young drivers were focused on being responsible and respectful drivers then the accident rates would certainly come down.

The training should cover the driving on unsealed roads and rural roads, as many city residents would have little or any experience on country roads, especially unsealed roads. Urban drivers may only spend time in country areas when on holidays and may not adjust their driving, which could result in the tragic results of accidents.

The other area of training that needs to be addressed is the maintenance of the vehicles to ensure that they are road worthy as a car with a defect could be a death trap for the driver, even a careful driver. The most regular problem observed on cars particularly for young people is worn or bald tyres and these can be extremely dangerous in wet conditions. If young drivers know what to look for in the maintaining of their cars and the risks associated with a defect in the car, then they would be able to find and resolve the problems before they become a crisis on the road.

There are a number of driver training programs that are operated by schools and service clubs in the Greater Taree City Council that are separate from the normal driving learning to get the driver's licence. Some of these courses will deal with the attitude side of driving, which are proving to be very successful in getting the message across. These courses generally cover the technical side of driving with practical sessions for the participants with elements dealing with making the right decisions on driving, such as not driving under the influence of alcohol. Some even have survivors from accidents to discuss their experiences and the importance of making the right decisions on the road. Greater Taree City Council supports some of these training courses with its Road Safety Officer attending and providing equipment to assist the delivering of the courses. These types of courses should be encouraged and all new drivers should attend such courses before obtaining their driver's licence.

Young drivers are unaware of the impact their carefree driving has on other drivers. They should be made to view videos prior to obtaining their licence that shows what happens in an accident and the aftermath, similar videos are shown to people attending the Traffic Offenders Program. If every young person could see what happens in an accident and the terrible results that may occur, which would include death, physical and emotional injury, vehicle damage and other property damage. There are the other consequences after an accident that would be in the video dealing with trauma, hospitalisation, Police, Courts, insurance and financial costs, loss of loved ones and friends, plus the disruption to the travelling public. The viewing of a graphic video as part of the driver training regime could result in young drivers less likely to offend and disobey the road rules.

Conclusion

The most important aspect that needs to be addressed with young drivers is attitude to their driving and the negative driving practices they are involved in. The education programs need to address this attitude problem and promote respect and responsible driving on the road network.

This change in driver beliefs will take time through adjustment to the education programs but once these attitudes start to change then these more positive driving views should be passed on to their children, which would create a generational change in driver attitudes.

If road users, especially young drivers, showed respect and conducted themselves in a responsible way on the road network then this should reduce the current high accident rates.