

SPEED LIMITS AND ROAD SAFETY IN REGIONAL NSW

Organisation: Upper Hunter Shire Council

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The Chair
Staysafe Committee
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Chair

Speed Limits and Road Safety in Regional NSW

Upper Hunter Shire Council welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the enquiry into Speed Limits and Road Safety in Regional NSW.

Upper Hunter Shire is located approximately 250 kilometres north west of Sydney in the Upper Hunter Valley and is known as the "Horse Capital of Australia". The Shire has four major towns, that of Scone, Aberdeen, Merriwa and Murrurundi. The area of the Shire is 8,100 square kilometres with a population of 13,000 and as with many rural shires the local road network is an important link in connecting our communities. Two major transport infrastructure facilities of national importance also pass through the Shire – these being the Golden and New England Highways.

The current incidence of road crashes in our region cannot be ignored any longer, and Council recognises the effort being undertaken to slow this horrific and unfortunate trend. The big six are speeding, driver fatigue, driver education, alcohol/drugs, pedestrians and road conditions.

The car is an essential requirement in rural areas for business, education and recreation. For this purpose it is vital that reasonable and effective road infrastructure links are maintained to both rural and regional centres. These road networks provide vital links for those in rural areas to access services provided only in larger centres and for visitors travelling to rural areas. Such links are essential for the health and well-being of residents and visitors to our region.

Studies undertaken in various areas around the Upper Hunter Shire have identified that the majority of road use is by car and motorbike (up to 80%). The second highest road use is by small trucks with 2 axles and cars with trailers have been identified as the third highest road user class. Heavy vehicles make up approximately 15-20% of total road users.

Many road authorities have undertaken road safety audits that recognise deficiencies within the local system and report on ways in which the network may be upgraded to a suitable standard throughout, for the purposes of improving road safety to a compliant level for anticipated road users.

Sealed sections of road network are predominantly sign posted with speed limits, however, unsealed sections are such that users are expected to adjust speeds as necessary. The legal speed limit of the unsealed network is up to 100 km/hour in optimal conditions. It is generally assumed that a vehicle speed of 80 km/hour may be reasonably expected to be driven by persons who are familiar with the road and surrounding area.

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Some of the more significant issues are:

Unsafe roadside environment

There is a need for additional roadside signage, including but not limited to warning signs, advisory signs and other signs as applicable. The replacement and/or maintenance of existing roadside signage is a must and needs to be funded accordingly. Road environments typically range from high standard dual carriageways to alignments that are steep, narrow and winding with tight curves.

There is a need for improvements to road geometrical design. Most of the unsealed roads across Australia have not been geometrically designed to safely accommodate current vehicles and road user requirements. The lack of engineering design has led to tight horizontal corners that appear sub standard, lack of road side signage warning motorists of these corners and no physical barrier protection or clear zone allowing for run off areas near these corners. Due to roads having little engineering design input, there are uncontrolled access points at locations that are dangerous due to being concealed from motorists using the road, or are located in positions that do not allow motorists enough sight distance to enter the road.

The vertical geometry of roads often includes crests, sags and steep sections. While motorists tend to slow during corners they do not typically slow for dips and crests, even though their stopping sight distance may be reduced as much, if not more during these changes in vertical geometry.

There is a need to construct physical barriers for road structures. Structures such as cattle grids, bridges, culverts and gates present on the road as part of the road environment generally have little approach visibility and no advanced warning signs. In addition there is generally no barrier protection on these facilities and where barrier protection does exist it is not compliant with current standards and requirements.

Variable pavement conditions

There is a need for improved consistent pavement conditions and/or increased advanced warning of changes in pavement conditions. The pavement is varied throughout rural New South Wales. In the higher altitude sections the unsealed pavement is generally gravelly and rocky and loose gravel becomes a safety concern on steep descents or corners. Lower sections are generally unsealed plastic clays which become slippery when wet.

Driver behaviour

There is a need for increased behavioural education. These are behavioural issues whereby people put themselves in unnecessary danger. It is apparent that some drivers either do not recognise that there is a risk to their personal safety or they think that the risk to them and others is acceptable. Driver education programs should be encouraged.

There are fewer overtaking opportunities along rural roads increasing the likelihood that motorists accept greater risks than usual when attempting to overtake slower vehicles. Overtaking lanes may not be necessary, however, other measures such as truck pull over areas should be incorporated into the road network.

Driver fatigue is an issue on most roads, however, it is particularly exaggerated in rural areas where there is little advanced warning of rest areas and general lack of information signs normally associated with thoroughfare roads. In addition, drivers often travel long distances from home to their workplace, and often their employment involves driving, further exacerbating the potential for driver fatigue.

Upper Hunter Shire Council is a strong supporter of the Black Spot Program which aims to remove or improve the safety of dangerous locations on road networks and in that way improve road safety to all communities. All projects funded are worthwhile, however, there are many more projects that need to be funded if targets of reduced road fatalities are to be met. Upper Hunter Shire Council's focus has been to direct funding to the renewal of the road network and targeting the removal of dangerous sections. There remains a continuing need for funding for road safety projects as part of an overall package to enable local authorities to achieve aims of improving safety at locations with a history of crashes involving death or injury.

Assuming current funding levels are maintained it will be some time before the removal of dangerous locations alone will enhance driver safety. The available driver education programs and the potential for development and expansion of these programs is essential to further reduce the likelihood of fatalities among drivers.

Initiatives such as the Towards Zero program, random breath testing, improved driver licensing practices, heavy vehicle safety improvements, and more effective and efficient traffic enforcement are just the beginning to a reduction in fatality levels.

Further action and development of programs to improve rural road safety is required but not limited to:

- Road Infrastructure Improvements
- Road Safety Audits and Treatments
- Railway Level Crossing Initiatives
- Alcohol interlocks, education and rehabilitation
- Fatigue
- Innovation and Occupant protection (increased restraint use, increased use of standard safety features such as ABS, ESC etc.). While new and enhanced technologies may be effective in urban and peri urban areas, many road networks either have limited or no line markings and are often narrow. Budget allocations for line marking, ripple strips and curb and guttering are extremely limited. This adversely affects vehicles with automatic lane recognition, making their systems virtually useless on rural and regional roads.

SPEED IS ONE OF THE MAJOR KILLERS ON OUR ROADS

- As driving experience increases accident involvement declines.
- Driving practice is not enough. Drivers, especially Learner and Provisional drivers, need to know how to anticipate hazards and take appropriate action. Increased or improved driving skills, and behaviour through supervised practice should be over a prolonged period of time in varied driving conditions should be facilitated.
- Additional enforcement (improved detection of speeding vehicles). There is a need for fixed speed and fatigue cameras to be operational and for compliance to be actively pursued. In addition, mobile speed monitoring vehicles could be employed off major arterial roads and across a broader spectrum of hours in order to monitor speeding during different times of the day.
- The default speed limit for many rural and regional roads is 100 km/h, and this is often experienced on both unpaved and poorly paved roads, where that speed may not be appropriate. Regular reviews by Transport for NSW should be undertaken, especially after storm events, and driver education around driving to the conditions should be encouraged.
- The use of variable speed limits should be encouraged especially during high traffic flow, in work zones, or during inclement weather such as icy or snow conditions.

The most common type of accident in our area is off road, round bend, hit object. Inappropriate speed and speeding saves little time on our roads but costs lives. Upper Hunter Shire Council can only reiterate on the concerns of local communities, not only within the immediate area, but those in surrounding areas and supports any initiative to reduce fatalities.

For further enquiries regarding this submission, please contact [REDACTED] on [REDACTED].

Yours sincerely

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Greg McDonald
GENERAL MANAGER