

The case for higher speed limits on Hwy. 401

**Driving faster on highways
safer, more economical,
proponents of change say**

By Ian Elliot

Whig-Standard Staff Writer

GORD THOMPSON MAY BE THE ONLY man in Ontario ever charged under the Highway Traffic Act for obeying the letter of the law.

The teacher from Campbellford and another motorist caused a four-kilometre traffic jam on Highway 401 seven years ago by driving side by side at the posted 100 km/h speed limit.

They were charged with obstructing traffic and had their licences temporarily suspended.

Weeks earlier, Thompson had been ticketed for going 117 km/h on the same road and staged his slow-motion protest after a judge told him he was breaking the law by going even a kilometre over the posted limit.

"It still kind of gets my blood going," Thompson said this week.

"The number on the [speed limit] sign isn't the number you're expected to drive at and no one will tell you what the tolerance actually is."

Thompson's situation may be the most ludicrous application of Ontario's speeding laws but it puts into focus what motorists prove with their right feet – that 100 km/h is often too slow for the province's 400-series highways.

A recent study by University of Toronto researcher Baher Abdulhai found every single driver exceeding the speed limit on some stretches of highway that he and graduate student Jaime Abraham studied.

His study recommended that the speed limit be raised to a more realistic 130 km/h.

That finding mirrors dozens of similar studies done on expressways in North America and Europe.

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Studies indicate that 85 per cent of motorists drive at speeds between 110 km/h and 130 km/h on the 401. According to most traffic experts, such a widespread variance from the posted speed means the limit should be raised.

And a survey of almost 300 motorists in Belleville several years ago found the majority of drivers wanted the speed limit increased by at least 10 km/h.

The provincial government, however, has dismissed the latest study, saying it has no intention of raising speed limits.

"Our own research suggests that raising the speed limits would in fact lead to an increase in traffic injuries and fatalities," said Transportation Ministry spokesman Anser Ahmed.

The response to his study has disappointed Abdulhai.

"I have not seen any counter-arguments based on fact," he said this week. "It's all been, 'You're going to kill people,' [or] 'There would be blood all over the roads.'"

He was particularly upset by some media reports on his findings.

"What surprised me was the reaction from the public [in TV reports]," he said. "In one report, they showed a 50-50 split among people about the higher limit, but in some locations measured in the report, 100 per cent of people were driving over the limit."

"If 100 per cent of the people are violating [the law] when they drive, where's the 50 per cent that opposes higher limits?"

The 100 km/h limit was set in the 1970s as a conservation measure during the oil crisis. Before that, the limit was 115 km/h, even though cars had few of the safety features that today's drivers enjoy.

SCRAPPED LIMIT

The United States scrapped its gas-saving 55 mph limit several years ago and left it to the states to set speed limits. Most opted for a 65 or even 75 mph (105 to 120 km/h) limit on major highways.

Since then, people on both sides of the issue have been producing studies.

Critics of higher speed limits point to an increased number of deaths on some highways with higher limits.

Supporters say raising speed limits actually makes highways safer. They argue higher speeds encourage motorists to use the road more. With increased traffic, the number of fatalities per 100 million miles driven - one of the basic measures of road safety - actually falls.

"It's one of those cases where you use statistics any way you want to," said David Leonhardt of the Canadian Automobile Association, which supported Abdulhai's conclusions if combined with a program of increased speed limit enforcement.

Michael Cain, director of research for the B.C. group Safety by Education Not Speed Enforcement (SENSE), said the group's efforts to raise speed limits drew the same fears of carnage on the roads.

"They said 'The faster you go, the harder you hit,' but that totally ignores the human interaction of driving," he said. "The whole argument ignores the fact that if you don't have an accident, you don't get hurt."

Abdulhai himself says higher speeds are not dangerous and that speed differentials cause accidents. A higher speed limit, he argues, will not cause people to drive faster; it merely reflects what they are already doing.

"It's really basic stuff," Abdulhai said. "It's not rocket science."

'REASONABLE'

Jim Baxter, president of the National Motorists Association, a U.S. consumers group that supports higher speed limits, said he was familiar with Abdulhai's study. "What your professor is saying is set the speed limit at the speed at which traffic is moving, which I think is a reasonable and prudent thing to do," he said.

"People don't have a death wish. You're not out to hurt yourself or to drive faster than is safe for the road."

Most of the resistance to higher limits comes from police and the insurance companies, which both profit from speeding tickets, he said.

"Police like the low limit because it gives them a reason to stop anyone they want," he said. "The insurance industry has always supported lower limits."

The other knock at the higher limits is that cars use more fuel at higher speeds. Baxter shrugs off that point. "Modern vehicles don't have nearly the differential in fuel consumption that they used to," he said.

"It's an argument that might have held sway in '75 ... [But] the individual should be allowed to decide if the saving of time is worth it."

Baxter said he is familiar with environmental arguments but that highway policy shouldn't be based on ideology. "There are side elements out there who don't like people having the right to go anywhere they want however fast they want to go," he said.

"There are environmentalists who would like to see us walk everywhere."

Leonhardt of the CAA said a higher limit on the 401 would allow police to

concentrate on the very fast and the very slow drivers, who present the most danger in traffic.

Those who drive over the limit should receive "zero tolerance," he said. "And for people who want to drive 80, maybe a 400-series highway is not where they ought to be."

Baxter noted that realistic speed limits would be welcomed by motorists in Kingston, for it would dramatically cut down on travel times to Toronto or Ottawa.

Higher speeds are not only safer, but economically beneficial, argued SENSE's Cain. "What we need to look at in this issue is where will society benefit?" he said. "[Higher speed limits] can reduce the number of crashes and provide benefits to the economy."

Leeds-Grenville MPP Bob Runciman, who has had a 600-km round-trip commute for 21 years, has publicly sup-

ported a higher speed limit on the 401, as did former transportation minister Al Palladini, but the issue has never caught fire at Queen's Park.

The last push to raise the limit dissolved after a rash of accidents involving wheels flying off heavy trucks.

As for Thompson, he has not had a speeding ticket since he and his companion set out on their legal Sunday drive, but he'd love to go back in front of a judge. "You know, when we did the protest at 100, we did not overtake one single vehicle," he recalled.

"If I get a ticket for going 120 on the 401 now, I'd go before the judge and say 'I can't go at 100, another judge told me I can't drive 100 on the 401.'"

Leonhardt said that incongruity needs to be addressed.

"That's the predicament that people are in right now, and people shouldn't be in that predicament."



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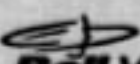
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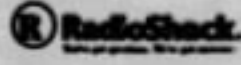
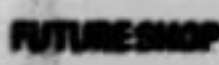
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