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MAKING MINNESOTA'S HIGHWAYS SAFER :

-- A Program to Improve
Driving Habits and Save Lives. --

GOVERNOR KARL F. ROLVAAG



A Special Message to Members of the
Sixty-Fourth Legislative Session

Wednesday, March 3, 1965

To the Members of the Legislature:

There are few areas of state concern which more directly or more seriously affect large numbers of Minnesotans than highway safety. When one considers the loss of property, the human suffering and misery, and above all the loss of life which results each year from automobile accidents in this state, one is appalled at the price we pay for the privilege of travelling from one place to another. The price is entirely too high, far out of proportion to its benefit, and it reflects badly on us all as members of a responsible society.

WORST TRAFFIC YEAR

Last year, 1964, was our worst traffic year. A total of 74,500 accidents were reported, resulting in 838 deaths, about 48,000 persons injured, and a total economic loss of approximately \$150 million. That we should tolerate these figures seems unbelievable. When a modern, civilized society cannot protect its citizens any better than we have done, then it must examine anew its responsibilities in this area.

Among the fundamental problems here is the growing popular belief that automobile accidents are, at least to a certain extent, an inevitable part of our lives. Accidents have become so commonplace that we scarcely take serious note of them any more. It is virtually impossible to pick up a newspaper or listen to a newscast today without learning of a new fatality, usually one that could have been prevented. With this sort of continuous exposure to disaster, we quickly become immuned to its significance, and as a result, never quite bring ourselves to face the problem squarely. If 838 persons died in one day as the result of a single calamity, it would constitute the greatest disaster in the history of the state, and the shock of it would persist for years. But when 838 persons die in an almost predictable manner over the course of a year, we accept it as an unfortunate but inevitable part of our lives.

RESPONSIBLE ACTION

The tragedy of this situation is that it is within our power to do something about it. The examples of other states clearly show that accidents can be avoided and lives saved through the application of a thoughtful and realistic accident prevention program. Such a program usually includes, to be sure, some unpopular measures, but these measures are unavoidable if the program is to be truly effective. We simply must ask ourselves whether education, stricter enforcement, and tougher penalties are an acceptable price for preserving human life and property. In my view they are more than acceptable -- they are absolutely necessary. It is the alternative -- doing nothing -- that is unacceptable. So although several of my proposals may be unpopular, they are responsible, and I hope you will keep this in mind as you consider them.

These recommendations are the result of careful study by the Governor's Traffic Safety Coordinating Committee, appointed by me more than a year ago and composed of knowledgeable and responsible state officials concerned with traffic safety. Furthermore, most of the recommendations have been endorsed by the Minnesota Safety Council, the League of Minnesota Municipalities, the Highway Interim Commission, the Minnesota PTA, and many other interested groups and individuals.

THE PROGRAM

In my judgment, there is now a consensus in Minnesota for affirmatively moving ahead in this area. I personally attach the very highest priority to the whole matter of traffic safety, and I know that you share this concern. Therefore, I respectfully urge your thoughtful consideration of the following recommendations.

1. Driver Education. I urge that the statutory age for lawful possession of a driver's license be raised to 18 for those persons who have not successfully completed a course in driver education approved by the Commissioner of Education. Upon completion of such a course, a license may be issued to an otherwise qualified person 16 years of age or older.

The number of drivers under age 20 in Minnesota constitutes only nine percent of the total driving population, and yet they account for 17 percent of all accidents and an even higher percentage of serious and fatal mishaps. Studies in 23 states have shown that those young people with the advantage of driver training are involved in only half as many accidents within five years after completion of their courses as are those of comparable age without such training.

The situation is dramatized in Minnesota by the fact that in the 1962-63 school year only 36,430 of the 113,000 eligible students were enrolled in driver education courses. In my judgment this proposal would provide the needed incentive to young people to acquire the benefits of driver training and thus ultimately reduce the number of accidents involving our younger citizens.

2. Supervision Personnel. There is a need for sufficient funds and personnel in the Department of Education to properly supervise the driver education and safety programs. In my Budget Message I have recommended that a position be provided in the Department of Education for these programs.

3. Driver Improvement Clinics. One of the most effective measures you could enact is legislation authorizing the establishment of local driver improvement clinics. These clinics would be an arm of the traffic court, giving the judge additional and more constructive means of effecting accident prevention as well as penalization.

The eight to ten hour courses offered by the clinics would emphasize to convicted offenders the need for correct attitudes, moral responsibility, and knowledge of driving laws. The clinics would be locally administered, and be authorized to collect minimum fees to enable them to be self-supporting.

In addition, the Highway Department would be authorized to require attendance at the clinics before reissuing suspended or revoked licenses.

Similar clinics have met with considerable success in other parts of the country. Over a 2½ year period in Louisville, only two percent of the 10,000 persons who went through the clinic ended up in court again for driving violations, while in Los Angeles only 300 out of 7,000 repeated. Clinics now operating on a pilot basis in the Twin Cities, Duluth, and Austin lead me to believe that this device can be equally successful in other areas of Minnesota.

4. Licensing and Regulation of Commercial Driver Training Schools. Adequate licensing and regulatory procedures governing commercial driver training schools

would assure responsible operation under reasonable rules and standards designed to protect the public, similar to regulations under which trade schools now operate.

5. Highway Patrol. The Minnesota Highway Patrol is currently limited by statute to 378 supervisors and officers, an increasingly inadequate number to properly patrol an expanding highway system carrying now more than 2 million vehicles. To meet greater enforcement and safety needs, I urge authorization for an immediate increase of 46 uniformed personnel for each of the next two years, and, in addition, authority for further increases in future years based upon an accident and traffic volume formula.

I feel very strongly that if we are to have a meaningful safety program, there must be adequate laws and adequate personnel to enforce those laws. With an ever-increasing number of vehicles on our streets and highways, we have a clear duty to protect the responsible driver by providing sufficient patrolmen to enforce the laws.

6. Re-examination. Only about one-half of the 1,850,000 qualified drivers in Minnesota have been licensed by means of an adequate testing procedure, and many of those so licensed were examined as much as 15 years ago. There is strong evidence to believe that large numbers of presently licensed drivers cannot meet adequate vision requirements and that others do not fully understand traffic laws or are not able to properly interpret traffic signs and signals.

I therefore urge that licensed drivers be required periodically to undergo examinations as to their vision and their knowledge of traffic laws. In addition, the Highway Department should be authorized to require a road test in situations where a person's driving record and court records indicate that one is desirable or necessary.

7. Annual Inspection of Motor Vehicles. Altogether too many accidents are the result of faulty safety equipment, particularly lights and brakes. The only way of ensuring that all safety devices of every vehicle function properly is by requiring an annual inspection of vehicles using our public highways.

Under the procedure which I propose, official inspection stations would be authorized by the Highway Department to issue an inspection certificate to vehicle owners whose brakes, lighting equipment, and other safety devices have been satisfactorily checked. The vehicle owners would be required to pay a nominal \$2 fee for each inspection, for which he would be given a certificate to be prominently displayed on the vehicle. Twenty-five cents of the fee would be returned to the state. Before a certificate could be issued, any faulty equipment would have to be corrected.

Similar systems have been successful in other states in reducing the number of accidents attributable to improper or faulty equipment, and I believe that such a system is long overdue in Minnesota.

8. Increased Penalties for Violators. I strongly believe that the penalties ought to be increased for driving when under the influence of liquor or drugs, for driving after suspension, cancellation or revocation of one's license, and for leaving the scene of an accident. These are perhaps the most inexcusable of all driving violations, requiring as they do conscious resolve to break the law, and for that reason, they should carry more stringent penalties. Such violators who cause another to be killed or seriously injured should be subject to even greater sanctions.