

Comments Before the  
Transportation Committees of the  
Senate and House of Representatives  
Tennessee General Assembly  
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AAA

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Mr. Chairman, committee members and guests. My name is Tim Wright and I am the Tennessee regional president for AAA – The Auto Club Group. With me today is Don Lindsey, Tennessee public affairs director. Both of us work in our Tennessee headquarters office in Knoxville. We would like to thank Chairmen Tracy and Matlock for once again giving us this opportunity to give you an update on the state of safety on Tennessee roads.

AAA – The Auto Club Group provides automotive, financial, travel, insurance, and safety services to nine million members and the general public throughout The Auto Club Group's eleven-state territory, including more than 600,000 members in Tennessee. ACG is the second-largest AAA club in the nearly 56-million-member AAA federation in North America.

One of AAA's core reasons for existing since its beginning in 1902 is to find effective policies that increase our freedom to travel, and keep us safe while we do.

As you will hear in the next several minutes, the overall state of Tennessee highway safety is good. Our state is bucking a national trend toward more highway deaths instead of fewer, and Tennessee has some of the highest-rated roads in the country, paid for without going into debt. However, as we will also discuss, significant challenges remain. Some are currently being addressed, and some are in desperate need of your help to ensure for the long-term that Tennessee's roads remain as safe as possible.

Four of the past five years saw the lowest number of road fatalities in the last 50 years, and 2015 marks the third year in a row that fewer than a thousand people died on Tennessee's roads. As of January 7th, according to preliminary figures from the Department of Safety and Homeland Security, crashes killed 961 people on Tennessee roads last year. That's about the same number as the 963 killed in 2014. This number, along with all other 2015 traffic statistics, will change as reports continue to come in. For most of 2015 the number of fatalities had hovered around 30 fewer than in 2014.<sup>i</sup>

But in December, at least 111 people were killed, which was a 30 percent increase over December of 2014, almost five times higher than any of the other three monthly increases, and the highest number of fatalities in any one month in the last six years.<sup>ii</sup> The reasons for this are not known for sure, but warmer weather and low fuel prices may have encouraged more people to be on the roads, creating more chances for fatal collisions.

One fatality is too many and Tennessee's safety community continues work every hour toward zero fatalities on our roads.

But while Tennessee's fatality number held steady, early estimates from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration show nationwide fatalities rising 8.1 percent.<sup>iii</sup>

Other numbers, by no means a complete list, also speak to Tennessee's traffic safety trends:

- The overall number of traffic crashes in Tennessee rose by 10 percent.
- DUI-related fatalities fell about sixteen percent.
- Crashes involving drugs other than alcohol rose last year, but the number of fatalities in those wrecks fell.

The numbers for both DUI crashes and those involving other drugs will likely rise as the long legal and medical processes surrounding them run their course over the coming months.

- Distracted driving crashes went up eight percent, causing four more deaths in 2015 compared to 2014. In 2015, the Tennessee Highway Patrol issued more than 1,700 texting-while-driving citations, a 24 percent increase over 2014, and more than 5,700 due care citations which often cover distracted driving.

In addition, there are a few other statistics that warrant further action. They are as follows:

- While both teen and senior drivers saw drops in fatal crash involvement, substantially more senior drivers were involved in fatal crashes than were teen drivers.
- The state saw increases in the number of pedestrian and bicycle fatalities, as well as an increase in rural road deaths.
- Tennessee ranks among the top ten states for wrong-way crashes.<sup>iv</sup>
- Seat belt use declined from 87.7 percent in 2014 to 86.2 percent in 2015<sup>v</sup>, and deaths of unbelted vehicle occupants continue to represent almost half the fatalities in vehicles where belts were available.

So what is being done about these statistics? The seat belt numbers illustrate the importance of the increased seat belt fines this legislature passed last year under the leadership of Sen. Bill Ketron and Chairman Jimmy Matlock. That one-and-a-half percent drop in seatbelt use represents thousands of drivers at much greater risk of injury and death. Raising the fine by a small amount, together with strong enforcement and education, has shown itself a potent tool to increase seat belt use.<sup>vi</sup> We hope this new law will have its intended effect – that is to increase seat belt use and save lives – and we thank you for voting for this important safety initiative.

The recent trend of more seniors in Tennessee involved in fatal crashes will likely escalate as about 10,000 people turn 65-years-old each day in the United States.<sup>vii</sup> We are also working to address that

population. To help seniors stay safely mobile the Governor's Highway Safety Office, AAA and the Department of Safety and Homeland Security are conducting a project with Jackson-Madison County General Hospital. The project has three main parts: conduct free professional older driver assessments with Certified Driver Rehabilitation Specialists, expand the availability of CarFit checkups to help seniors better fit their cars and get the most out of them, and provide training to driver license station employees throughout the state on senior driver issues.

Regarding wrong-way crashes, Tennessee has the unfortunate distinction of ranking among the top ten states for crashes involving vehicles traveling the wrong way on one-way roads. These crashes, while relatively rare, usually have devastating consequences. At the request of TDOT, The Auto Club Group Traffic Safety Foundation's Road Improvement Demonstration Project funded a professional traffic engineering study to find low-cost measures that can cut the chance of wrong-way crashes at specific TDOT-identified sites. The Foundation also conducted a broad survey of Tennesseans about wrong-way crashes. Almost a third of the more than 800 responders reported seeing wrong-way drivers as often as a few times per year, and in more than 300 free-form responses they identified many additional sites where drivers often go the wrong way.<sup>viii</sup> The project showed that the potential for these crashes may be higher than thought.

One of the big factors in highway safety is the quality of roads. Safe roads and bridges cost substantial money to build and maintain. And as you have heard for years, that is a growing problem in Tennessee, one that is not going away. In 2008 and 2009 I had the privilege of serving on a joint committee convened by House Transportation Committee Chairman Bill Harmon, in response to widespread concerns about the future of Tennessee's transportation funding. Even then legislative leaders recognized that we had a serious problem with transportation funding that was not going away, but as we sit here today, there has been very little action taken.

Consider the person from Mt. Juliet who arrives home from work and finds a package waiting on her that she ordered from Amazon. A FedEx truck had delivered it to her doorstep, having brought it from a distribution facility in Nashville. A bigger truck brought the item overnight from the FedEx hub in Memphis, up I-40 to that Nashville distribution center. And before that, it had been flown from the manufacturer's location across the country. So you can see, that one seemingly simple little commercial transaction hides a massive set of movements that all depend on Tennessee's roads.

Our families – and our tourists – ride these roads, too, whether it's a vacation for a family from the Tri-Cities to go to the Smokies, a convention group staying at the new Bass Pro Shops Pyramid that wants to take a tour bus ride to go see Graceland, or the simple daily ride to work to support their families. We drive on roads voted third-best in the country, yet they cost our citizens per-person the third-least in the country.<sup>ix</sup>

For freight, our visitors, and especially for our families, our roads must be safe. You have heard for years that safe and efficient road transportation in Tennessee is in jeopardy without new sources of money to pay for maintenance and new construction. We're not alone. Many other states have the same problem, but worse since they are paying off huge transportation debt that Tennessee has not – and should not – incur. Now I'd like to talk to you about what nine other states have done recently to address the same long-term transportation funding problems that Tennessee now faces.

Kentucky and North Carolina took steps in 2015 to stop revenue losses caused by falling fuel prices. Both states had been adjusting taxes based on the wholesale price of fuel, and both saw that sharply falling gas prices would dramatically cut transportation revenue. They set per-gallon tax rate floors that prevented rates from falling further, and changed tax indexing away from the wholesale price of fuel to indexing on inflation and population growth. North Carolina still lost revenue and both states may have to enact other revenue measures in the future.<sup>x</sup>

Other states took action to improve their transportation funding with tax rate increases:

Nebraska overrode its governor's veto to enact a six-cent-per-gallon tax increase with no indexing, raising an estimated \$76 million in the first year.

Washington state raised its per-gallon tax by 11.9 cents without indexing. The same legislation gave local governments several options for raising local transportation revenue.

Iowa raised gas taxes 10 cents-per-gallon and raised several vehicle related fees, with the expected revenue increase to be \$215 million per year.

Still other states went beyond just fuel taxes to other funding sources and indexing:

Utah expects to raise about \$76 million per year with its new fuel tax structure based on an immediate five cent-per-gallon fuel tax increase and future increases based on a 12 percent tax on the statewide wholesale gasoline price. Taxes on diesel and other fuels were raised to the equivalent of 16.5 cents-per-gallon. The same measure gave local governments the right to ask voters to put local sales tax revenue into transportation.

Texas took steps different from all the others, passing Proposition Seven in November, 2015 which says that once the state generates \$28 billion in sales tax revenue, the next \$2.5 billion goes to the state highway fund. This will be in effect every year for 15 years, and lawmakers have the option to extend the measure in 10-year increments.

The states of Michigan and Georgia took the most comprehensive approach.

Michigan raised gas and diesel taxes by 7.3 and 11.3 cents-per-gallon respectively, and both will be indexed to inflation, but the increases don't take effect until 2017. These tax increases are expected to raise about \$400 million, with another \$200 million to come from vehicle fees beginning in 2017, and a gradually

increasing contribution from Michigan's general fund which will eventually kick in \$600 million when fully implemented in 2020.

And finally, our neighbor Georgia took a very comprehensive approach, eliminating a four percent sales tax on fuel and replacing it with a 26 cent-per-gallon tax, adjusted annually based on inflation and vehicle efficiency. In addition, the state added a \$200 annual fee on electric passenger cars and \$300 fee for electric commercial vehicles, a heavy vehicle impact fee of \$50 or \$100 per year depending on vehicle weight, as well as a five-dollar per night lodging tax dedicated to transportation. A local option allowed counties or groups of counties to enact their own transportation taxes. The changes are estimated to raise \$900 million in new revenue the first year.

These are nine of the states that chose in 2015 to take on directly the uncertainty of future transportation funding. Delaware, South Dakota and Idaho also took similar steps. More details of the measures taken by these, and all the states mentioned today, are in the handouts you'll receive. The federal government – at last – passed a multi-year transportation bill that will alleviate some of the uncertainty the states have been feeling, but by no means all of it.

The steps Tennessee has taken and will take to set out clear transportation goals and projects that meet citizens' needs, to maintain transparent TDOT management and communications, and to find fair, solid and creative ways to pay for them all, will bring us tremendous benefits, both economic and safety.

Tennesseans, and all who come to Tennessee, deserve no less.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We'll be happy to answer any questions.

Endnotes:

- <sup>i</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all 2015 traffic safety statistics were provided by the Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security's TITAN Division, January 7, 2016.
- <sup>ii</sup> Telephone conversation with Tennessee Governors Highway Safety director Kendell Poole, December 9, 2016.
- <sup>iii</sup> "Traffic fatalities fall in 2014, but early estimates show 2015 trending higher", news release from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, November 14, 2015.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Guidelines for Reducing Wrong-way Crashes on Freeways*, produced by Auburn University for the Illinois Center for Transportation and the Illinois Department of Transportation, 2014.
- <sup>v</sup> "Governor's Highway Safety Office, Tennessee Highway Patrol Announce Statewide Decrease in Seat Belt Usage Rate", news release, Tennessee GHSO, August 4, 2015
- <sup>vi</sup> *Strategies to Increase Seat Belt Use: An Analysis of Levels of Fines and the Type of Law*, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, DOT HS 811 413, November, 2010.
- <sup>vii</sup> Cohn, D'Vera and Taylor, Paul, "Baby Boomers Approach 65 – Glumly", Pew Research Center website article, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/12/20/baby-boomers-approach-65-glumly/>.
- <sup>viii</sup> Tennessee Wrong Way Survey, AAA – The Auto Club Group, December 1, 2015.
- <sup>ix</sup> University of Tennessee Center for Transportation Research, 2013 FHWA figures and "America's Top States for Business 2015", CNBC poll, <http://www.cnbc.com/2015/06/24/americas-top-states-for-business.html>
- <sup>x</sup> All transportation funding information collected from AAA National office research, January 5, 2016, and *Capital Ideas II, State Transportation Funding Lessons from 2015 – Challenges for 2016*, Transportation for America, December, 2015.