

The Alphabet Soup of Safety
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Listen to any one from FHWA (Federal Highway Administration) talk about SAFETEA-LU (Safe, Accountable, Equitable, Transportation Equality Act: A Legacy to Users) and your head may start spinning, especially if the topic is safety and the HSIP (Highway Safety Improvement Program) and how it will replace the HES (Hazard Elimination System) and just one component of the new program is HRRR (High Risk Rural Roads).

The Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP) provided \$5.1 billion nationally for 2006-2009. Of this amount, \$220 million is set aside annually for a program most of us are familiar with, the Rail-Highway Safety program. The remainder is distributed by formula based on each State's lane miles, vehicle miles traveled, and number of fatalities. About \$90 million of this is to be set aside annually for construction and operational improvements on High-Risk Rural Roads (HRRR).

You know the old saying, all politics is local....the same applies for safety. So your question maybe why should I care about this federal stuff? Well, you should know the last bill really did put focus on the safety issue (almost doubling the funding devoted towards safety) and strived for transportation policy to include **all public** roads, like county roads and highways. And it should as this bill supported making data driven decisions. Those states with good crash data are all showing the same trend that about half of the life changing serious injury or fatal crashes are occurring on local, two lane rural roads. For each of us, safety of our road system is our number one priority, a fatality or serious injury on our roads may be a friend or neighbor. I was inspired by a county engineer in Washington State who keeps a memorial with the name of every person who died in a fatal crash on his roads. This log sits in his office near his desk and serves as a reminder of why we come to work every day.

So what did the federal bill do for you locally? The resources of the last federal bill are supposed to be data driven which would imply that roughly half of the safety monies, or your state's allocation from the HSIP part of the bill, should be spent on strategies that will reduce fatalities and serious injuries on local two lane rural roads. Have you been involved in the development of your state's strategic highway safety plan? Has your state solicited local safety projects? Are you seeing an infusion of money dedicated to improving signage or other strategies towards reducing lane departure crashes? If the answer is no, then it is time for you to become involved.

Most of us don't get involved because we don't know enough about it to discuss it intelligently. SAFETEA-LU, HSIP and HRRR are meaningless acronyms. So I'll use Minnesota as an example. Let me qualify this first by saying all states are different and this is a good thing. In my opinion, one of the goals of the NACE Safety Working Group is to find that state that has the best working relationship with locals, shares the money respectfully, and is truly reducing fatal and serious injury crashes. Minnesota is at the lead of the pack but there are others such as Iowa, Oregon, Washington, and Illinois who all have great programs in the works. FHWA is looking to synthesize this into best practices, but my money is on the work of NACE to find and promote the best of the best.

In Minnesota, there is about \$20 million annually to be programmed as HSIP monies. Within that about \$1.9 million or so is intended for the High Risk Rural Roads Program. Minnesota developed an eligibility list, based on crash rates, of those roads that should be evaluated for safety strategies and will be likely to receive funding, well as far as \$1.9 million per year can go.

The bigger pot of money is the HSIP program as a whole. Traditionally in Minnesota, only a handful of county projects would be programmed for the old HES program as it was based on a cost benefit basis and rural roads with lower traffic counts and scattered crash locations had a hard time competing with state routes. Minnesota has developed guidance for the HSIP program to look at corrective (reactive) and preventative (proactive) approaches. The guidance is based on data. For example 2002-2004 indicates 67% of the fatalities and serious injury crashes occurred on local highways and roads versus 33% on the trunk highway system. It should follow then that \$20 million, less the \$1.9 million for HRRR, leaves about \$18 million and 67% of that should be about \$12 million devoted towards safety improvements on the local system. Guidance however is not always reality and there are hurdles to cross in how to implement such a significant diversion of traditional state dollars to local dollars.

So now what should you do? First suggestion would be to get involved in any updates to your state's strategic highway safety plan and make sure that there are strategies that target your roads...most will be proactive solutions. Next, find out who your state safety engineer is and get to know them. Encourage commitment of a seasoned traffic safety professional to assist locals within your state. Another good resource is your safety engineer in your state's federal highway division to answer any questions. Request a copy of your state's annual safety report that includes a section on 5% of the system identified most in need of safety improvements. Talk to your fellow county road managers and get a group together to meet with your state folks...the only way to reach a common goal is with communication.

While most of the discussion has been about seeking that golden pot at the end of the rainbow, I truly believe that to be effective in the safety arena boils down to construction **AND** maintenance with a safety goal. It is really about being smarter with the money we already have, that is, from a safety perspective with our every day responsibilities like working with utility companies *not* to put that power pole at the t intersection or proactively eliminating unneeded field approaches and eliminating the 55 gallon drum upon which your neighbor's mailbox rests. And it will take passionate, motivated leadership. There's nobody better than you.

I once told my little brother as he earned his MD as an ER DR how proud of him I was for how he saves lives, literally every day. My little brother responded that it was he who was proud, because of what we do -- we save lives by the thousands...every day, they just don't know it.