

August 25, 2021

Attention all North Kawarthans! With the recent fatal accident on Highway 28 and in response to some unconstructive criticism that I and others working on these roadway safety issues have received since then, I wanted to share one of my responses (below) with the hope of correcting misinformation and to encourage some thoughtful consideration before opinions are expressed and/or shared as facts. My sincerest condolences to all those affected by this accident and the tragic loss of life.

Thank you for reaching out to me regarding this most recent tragedy. I will take a break from my advocacy work for Highway 28 safety in order to reply to your email and provide some accurate information. It is a sad fact to note that I was working on the executive summary draft of our Highway 28 Community Safety Zones (CSZ) application when I got word of the accident.

This serious issue is something that I have been focused on since becoming Mayor in December 2018. In fact, my very first Ministry of Transportation (MTO) and Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) meeting regarding Highway 28 was in April 2019, after a rash of accidents and the death of a neighbour of mine that March. I have been in regular communication with the MTO, the OPP and our MPP Dave Smith regarding the number of accidents and reports of unsafe driving on this provincial highway since then.

As Chair of the North Kawartha Police Services Board (PSB), the Board and I work closely with Peterborough County OPP to address this and many other community safety issues. Last year we purchased a Black Cat Radar device to track not just speed, but volume of traffic and vehicle types which can be placed on all roads within our municipality. The data it has collected on Highway 28 traffic in just one year has been astounding. Through my role as North Kawartha's Mayor and as PSB Chair, I have been authorized to petition the province to designate the portions of Highway 28 that pass through Big Cedar, Woodview and Apsley as Community Safety Zones which will double the fines for many moving violations within these zones and lead to greater enforcement. Designating these zones also gives municipalities the ability to implement photo radar as well. This past May, I did a Public Service Announcement with Peterborough County OPP Acting Inspector Chris Galeazza to highlight the many safety concerns on Highway 28, raise public awareness and educate drivers. You can find the video here <https://youtu.be/T-qSgYPutHY>.

What is interesting to note is that other than wildlife strikes, irresponsible driver behavior is the root cause of almost all other collisions. This is the incredible challenge we face... trying to change driver behavior. During this past June, I and Township staff met with several MTO officials, our MPP, and the OPP for another Highway 28 safety briefing. Here is some of the information they provided:

“Pavement markings are used to supplement other forms of traffic control and serve an advisory or warning function for drivers. They do not have a legal status of their own. The review of Highway 28 through the Woodview area confirmed the pavement markings and “no-passing” areas are in compliance with established guidelines used throughout the province. The arbitrary removal of safe passing opportunities would erode compliance with pavement markings in other areas resulting in safety concerns.”

When asked about lowering the speed limit, this is what we were told:

“When considering a change to an existing speed zone, the ministry reviews the highway geometry, traffic volumes, vehicle operating speeds, adjacent development, pedestrian activity and collision history in the area. Most drivers travel at a rate of speed that feels comfortable to them, taking into consideration the characteristics of the roadway and surrounding conditions. Imposing a speed limit that is too low for the area may contribute to a higher frequency of collisions because some drivers will continue to drive at the speed that feels comfortable to them, while others will make an effort to adhere to the speed limit. This creates a higher speed differential between approaching vehicles and can in turn have a negative impact on the overall safety of the highway. Based upon our review and the TAC speed study results, the existing 80 km/h speed limit zone is appropriate along this portion of Highway 28.”

The MTO and OPP are collaborating with North Kawartha Township to implement more safety measures including the recent placement of mobile speed message signs, brushing, improved signage and greater OPP presence and enforcement. As NK Fire Chief Jesse Lambe expressed at our June meeting: ‘Fatal or not, every single accident is a life changing event for everyone involved.’ His statement is incredibly powerful and true. It impacts the victims, the first responders, the residents who live along the emergency detour routes, and all those who travel that highway in fear that it will happen to them or a loved one next.

While I have done so internally, I would like to take this opportunity to let you know how grateful and appreciative I am for all first responders. I can only imagine the toll it must take on our volunteer firefighters, our police and our paramedics who must respond to the same highway locations time and again; to provide life-saving assistance in all weather and conditions while facing anger and abuse from other drivers who have been ‘inconvenienced’ by the road closures and detours. Our first responder and law enforcement men and women work hard every day to prevent so many tragedies and most days they are successful. To think that they can prevent all accidents is unrealistic. But that doesn’t mean that they and others including me, aren’t doing everything in our power to try and do just that. I’m sure every time another accident occurs they (just like me) want to scream with frustration and must feel like all our efforts are in vain. Suggesting that we are waiting for a certain number of deaths before we act is untrue, unhelpful and disrespectful to everyone that has been working diligently on this issue.

The bottom line is that drivers need to drive responsibly. Highway 28 is a well-designed and maintained roadway designed to move high volumes of traffic at high speeds. It is not inherently unsafe. The irresponsible, angry and selfish attitudes that causes detoured drivers to scream and yell obscenities at our first responders is the same attitude that is at the heart of the unsafe and aggressive driving behavior: like speeding, tailgating, unsafe passing, ignoring traffic, road and weather conditions, being impaired etc. I sometimes suspect this behavior is all part of a misguided effort to get to their destination faster. NK Roads Supervisor Jeff Waldon clearly addressed this erroneous thinking in a recent post.

“The section of Highway 28 between Northey’s Bay road and Anstruther Lake road is 18 kilometers long, has a posted speed limit of 80 km/hr and is maintained by the Ministry of Transportation of Ontario (MTO). Driving an average speed of 82 km/hr it takes 12 minutes and 23 seconds to travel this section. Driving an average speed of 98 km/hr it takes 11 minutes and 1 second, a difference of 1 minute and 22 seconds. Driving excessive speeds does not gain the time that we tell ourselves, drive safe everyone!”

As for commenting on Facebook, I have decided to post this response to my Mayor's Facebook Page. However, please do not mistake my lack of participation in the plethora of unkind, inappropriate and misinformed debates that occur on social media as an indication that I don't care or that I am not exhausting every means at my disposal to address this or any other matter. I feel that my time is better spent advocating for our community's well-being and working on important community issues like this, rather than scrolling through endless comments on social media.

For better context, not only am I the Mayor and Police Service Board Chair, but my family also operates a business in Woodview where several of these accidents have occurred. I am a resident that must drive that highway on a regular basis. My husband is one of many local contractors who rack up thousands of kilometres hauling heavy loads on Highway 28 all year round. I am a parent who has children learning to drive on that highway along with riding the school bus on it 10 months of the year. I, like you and everyone else are deeply shaken and upset about all Highway 28 accidents including Saturday's tragedy.

On a further personal note, my husband was stopped in Big Cedar shortly after the accident occurred on Saturday and he was detoured around Stoney Lake. He was bringing home dinner and while we were famished by the time he arrived, we were so grateful that he did arrive safe and sound. We wondered if he hadn't stopped to get that coffee for the ride home, could it have happened to him? I personally, have adjusted my driving behavior and habits so much in the last few years. Every time I pull out onto 28 I worry that this might be it.

I hope this detailed response clarifies and explains not only my work to date on this issue, but also acknowledges the many different agencies, departments and people that are working alongside me to make our community as safe as possible.

Finally, I humbly request that you and every single person that drives Highway 28 to please drive with care and be aware. I want nothing more than to have you and everyone else arrive safely at your destination wherever that may be. Sincerely, Carolyn.