

SUMMARY OF 2019 ANNUAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY PLANNING MEETING

“BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS”

Positive traffic safety and acceptable driving behaviors were the focus at the Montana Department of Transportation’s annual planning meeting last month in Helena. The Oct. 30-31 meeting, titled “Breaking down barriers,” updated implementation of the Comprehensive Highway Safety Plan and included members of state, local, federal, and tribal governments, including law enforcement, public works departments, and other public safety agencies. MDT drafts the safety plan to comply with federal highways legislation. “Vision Zero” is part of this safety plan, referring to an eventual goal of zero fatalities or suspected serious injuries on Montana’s roadways. Montana’s safety plan is due for a rewrite next year, and new federal transportation legislation is expected in 2020 or 2021.

EMPHASES ON CRASHES, IMPAIRMENT, OCCUPANT’S

Much of the planning meeting focused on three emphasis areas of the Comprehensive Highway Safety Plan: **roadway departures and intersection crashes, impaired driving, and occupant protection**. Reducing crashes and impaired driving and increasing occupant safety is expected to quickly reduce the number of highway fatalities and injuries.

Better designed roadways and intersections can reduce fatalities and injuries from **roadway departures and intersection crashes**, MDT engineers said. MDT statistical models identify poor roadways and intersections and uses proven countermeasures—such as rumble strips, increased signs, slope flattening, median barriers, redesigned turn lanes, roundabouts, wider shoulders, and other measures.

Use of seatbelts is perhaps the most recognizable method of improving **occupant protection**. Media campaigns and educational efforts like child safety seat fitting stations are some methods toward improving this. Department surveys indicate seatbelt use is increasing in Montana.

Most **impaired driving** fatalities and injuries in Montana have these similarities: a male driver doing over 55 mph on rural roads during a summer weekend. Most of these crashes are single vehicle roadway departures with unrestrained occupants. This year’s average alcohol blood content for a DUI is 0.19 percent.

Law enforcement and county prosecutors said “drug-impaired driving” nearly equals alcohol-impaired driving fatalities and injuries. Many incidents involve drivers who have combined drugs and alcohol. The most common drugs identified in impaired driver incidents are marijuana, meth, morphine, valium, and Xanax.

AUTONOMOUS VEHICLES

Autonomous or self-driving vehicles, also referred to as cooperative automated transportation, are expected to refashion the future of transportation, MDT experts said. Whether or not this results in driverless vehicles remains to be seen—and subject to an evolving policy debate. It is also unclear when autonomous vehicle technology may be useable and available in more extreme northern climates like Montana. A proposed test of a truck “platoon” from the Twin Cities to Billings this past August may be a glimpse at that future. Among many issues to be determined by automotive companies and policy-makers is the wear-and-tear on current highway infrastructure.

URBAN AND RURAL SAFETY

Roadway fatalities and injuries occur mostly on rural roads, according to MDT statistics. To better understand rural traffic incidents, the department is proposing to roll out a rural transportation management center next year. This center will expand on the efforts of the travel information map, which department staff claim is the most-visited page in state government.

STALLED LEGISLATION

MDT Director Mike Tooley said two pieces of unpassed legislation during the 2019 session could help the state toward its “Vision Zero” goal—and should perhaps again be priorities for the 2021 Legislature. House Bill 49 (Create a vehicle occupant safety pilot program) allows law enforcement to stop any driver not using a seatbelt, a policy referred to as a “primary seatbelt law.” Senate Bill 65 (Generally revise drug and alcohol laws) revises and tightens the state’s DUI laws, including allowing certain officers to draw blood for testing if a suspect refuses a breath test.

MEETING MATERIALS

All presentations from the meeting will be posted at mdt.mt.gov/visionzero/plans/chsp.shtml.