Road Safety – Is It a Local Government Priority? 
(What Does the Evidence Suggest?)

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Abstract

Almost 70% of the 392 fatalities on NSW roads in 2017 occurred on country roads (Transport for NSW, 2018). Each year, upwards of half the State’s road fatalities occur on local roads, roads that are the sole responsibility of local government.

As THE road authority, local councils have the legislated responsibility to manage their road infrastructure; fundamentally this includes ensuring the safety of road users on their networks.

Councils and the State Government can no longer plead ignorance to the contribution local roads make to the tragedy and trauma occurring across NSW. Unfortunately, the current situation sees a myriad of systemic hurdles that result in local government not making road safety a priority?

What is required to change this?

Overview

When considering an application for a three-fold expansion of a regional quarry operation, what led a local council to reject a proposal by the developer to upgrade the local road in a way that would demonstrably reduce road safety risk to road users?

What is the basis to council blaming the deceased driver of a single vehicle runoff road crash for the cause of a crash, particularly when Council was aware that there had been at least two fatal crashes on the same section of local road over the previous 18 months (Mooren 2017, Sarkissian 2018)?

Are councils interested in understanding why people are being killed and seriously injured in crashes in their local government area (LGA)? Are they equipped to learn from crashes on their roads, to apply best practice principles of the Safe System approach and contribute to the national and state goals of zero death and serious injury on public roads?

And what is an appropriate response by local government to crashes occurring on their road network, both at the human level, to understand the impact on local communities, and from a technical perspective, to prevent further crashes and the associated trauma occurring?

If accepted, a full paper will draw on the author’s experience of over 16 years working in NSW local government and more than 10 years working on national and international road safety projects, to discuss areas where local government, its Councillors, managers and staff, are prevented from understanding and seriously fulfilling their road safety responsibilities.

The discussion will reference to two real world examples to illustrate the type and range of systemic barriers that work against Councils making road safety a priority. The first case study outlines a potential future tragedy in waiting that, if realised, will significantly impact in a small rural community; the second case study will outline an example of a tragedy that has already had such a tragic impact and discuss the Council response by the community to calls for action to prevent even more harm.

In highlighting the type of systemic barriers faced by local government, the paper will discuss where systemic change and improvement is necessary to allow Councils to better identify road safety risk on their road networks and to develop appropriate strategies that allow them to better
manage these risks, permitting this important tier of government to ‘make it happen done’ and move towards zero death and serious injury.

References


Transport for NSW, 2018. NSW Road Safety Plan 2021