

SPEED LIMITS

Grievance

MR P. ABETZ (Southern River) [9.39 am]: My grievance relates to our inconsistent speed limits and is directed to the Minister for Transport, who is represented by the member for Nedlands in this house, and Main Roads. We all agree that appropriate speed limits are an important part of any road safety strategy. I preface my remarks by saying that I am absolutely committed to road safety. By the time I was 17 years old, two of the boys that I went to school with had killed themselves as a result of drink-driving. As a pastor I have performed too many road-death funerals. I am absolutely committed to road safety. I know the trauma that it causes families. I have walked with families through the years following a death and I know how painful that is. It is in that context that I bring this grievance.

People in my electorate repeatedly come to me to express their frustrations at the inconsistency of speed limits in our state—and I have experienced this myself. I will give a couple of examples in my electorate, or close to my electorate. Nicholson Road in Langford is a dual carriageway. It has a very wide median strip and very wide verges so that people can turn on their verge and drive out forwards. For many years it had a 70-kilometre-an-hour speed limit and then it was dropped to 60 kilometres an hour because of the heavy trucks that were using that road. That was before Roe Highway was completed. Now that Roe Highway has been completed, there are virtually no heavy trucks using Nicholson Road anymore. The speed limit is still 60 kilometres an hour but most people immediately assume it has a 70-kilometre-an-hour speed limit. The police are regularly there raising a great amount of revenue for the government. The interesting thing is that Nicholson Road has a 60-kilometre-an-hour speed limit but, just as it gets towards Albany Highway, there is a couple of hundred metres where the speed limit is 70 kilometres an hour. Why? It makes no sense.

Vahland Avenue in Riverton is a dual carriageway. It has a very narrow median strip and very narrow verge. People reversing out of their driveways to get onto the road often take their lives in their own hands, so to speak. It has a 70-kilometre-an-hour speed limit. If one goes to the end of Vahland Avenue and turns into Leach Highway, the highway has triple lanes in both directions and a wide median strip, and no access is allowed from any of the properties that adjoin it. It has exactly the same speed limit of 70 kilometres an hour. It is absurd.

Any safety-conscious, experienced driver using commonsense should have a fair idea of what the speed limit is on a particular piece of road. When I went to high school, in maths and physics we were taught that speed limits were set by finding the 85 percentile speed of road users, in normal conditions. That does not seem to be the case anymore. The rule that we travel at 50 kilometres an hour unless a road is otherwise signposted is one that seems a sensible enough rule, but even within councils in different local government areas there is a great variety of speed limits. The City of Joondalup does not have any 60-kilometre-an-hour zones—it is either 50 or 70 kilometres an hour. The Cities of Cannington and Gosnells have 60-kilometre-an-hour zones. Amherst Road in my electorate is a fairly narrow residential road. It is a feeder road—under the terminology that local governments use—and it has had many accidents on it. I think it was last week or the week before that a young boy riding his bicycle on the footpath was knocked off his bicycle because a driver had lost control of his car coming around the bend. The boy ended up with broken knuckles; thankfully nothing worse. People in that street have had cars demolished. People in that street are not sleeping in their front bedrooms anymore out of safety fears because every couple of months a car ends up in somebody's house. Interestingly enough, there has apparently not been one speed camera used on that street to address this road safety issue; yet Nicholson Road, which has such a ridiculously low speed limit, attracts repeated police attention. They catch many unsuspecting drivers.

The Netherlands, where the speed limit is lower than what an experienced driver would reasonably expect, has a policy of placing a very large speed limit sign at the change of a speed limit. Then, every 100 metres or so, there is a very small sign, on whatever poles or buildings there are, as a reminder to people of the speed limit. Sometimes there can be a legitimate reason for having a lower speed limit than what an experienced, safety-conscious driver might expect.

Research in Australia and overseas has demonstrated that arbitrarily imposed speed limits that are too low attract poor levels of compliance. Actual speeds remain at the same levels as before unless massive and continued enforcement is undertaken. However, realistic and credible speed limits will be observed by the majority of road users. What frustrates me is that we see signs on the sides of the roads “speed cameras used in this area” but there is no speed limit sign for more than a kilometre either side of it. If we really want to encourage people to observe the speed limit, why not display a speed limit sign for that area? The present arrangement seems absurd to me. It almost seems that speed cameras are designed to raise revenue rather than provide safety.

I call on the Minister for Transport to establish a community speed limit review task force, as was done in New South Wales in 2005, to review speed limits throughout the state and to develop some consistent rules by which Main Roads Western Australia sets the speed limits.

MR W.R. MARMION (Nedlands — Parliamentary Secretary) [9.46 am]: I thank the member for Southern River for raising such an important issue. Although I am not the Minister for Transport, it is an issue that I do have some knowledge of, being an ex-Main Roads engineer. I do know how speed zoning is done by the very good department of Main Roads. It will be extremely difficult in seven minutes to cover all the points the member made, but I will do my best.

I will give a preamble before specifically addressing the roads that have been mentioned. Safe speeds is one of four cornerstones of the safe system approach to road safety that the government has endorsed in the new Towards Zero road safety strategy. Main Roads Western Australia is the speed zoning authority. It is responsible for setting speed limits on all public roads in Western Australia. Australian standards and best practice guidelines are used in this process—I can assure members that that is so. This ensures that speed limits are set in a consistent manner to achieve a balance between road safety, community amenity and transport efficiency. To achieve this balance, many factors are taken into account when a speed zoning analysis is undertaken. This includes the road function, the traffic volumes, types of road users, roadside development, the frequency and type of intersections, the number of crossovers, reported crash data, and the prevailing traffic speeds. The member is right: in the past the 85 percentile was used as part of the overall equation.

Main Roads checks on the speed limits throughout the state. Before it implements a particular speed zone, it also checks with police and the local authority on whether they agree that it is appropriate. Speed limits that do not achieve a high level of voluntary compliance have little road safety benefit, which is also a point that the member made. Experience has shown that the imposition of artificially low speed limits has little impact on the operating speed chosen by the majority of motorists unless constant police enforcement is provided. In contrast, realistic speed limits can be effective in not only regulating traffic flow, but also reducing the incidence of crashes, because the majority of motorists voluntarily observe them. I think that is a very important point.

In terms of safe roads, freeways are the highest standard of road. Obviously, they do not have many intersections and they do not have very many entries onto them. Furthermore, there is not the opportunity for head-on collisions to occur because the carriageways are separated. I will get to that as my final point, if I have time.

Main Roads is aware of community concerns about inconsistent speed limits. It endeavours, where possible, to maintain consistent speed limits, particularly on short stretches of roads with varying adjacent roadside development—it is hard in that situation. Main Roads has asked me to point out that speed signs are placed on both sides of the carriageway wherever a speed limit change occurs. Repeated speed limit signs are also placed at regular intervals and on the departure side of every major intersection. The recommended distance between repeater speed limit signs that Main Road uses is as follows: 60 to 70 kilometres an hour, one kilometre spacing; 80 to 90 kilometres an hour, 1.5 kilometre spacing; 100 kilometres an hour, three kilometre spacing; and 110 kilometres an hour, four kilometre spacing. I am advised that the spacing used in WA is closer than the spacing specified in the nationally accepted Australian standards. In Western Australia, we use more signs to remind motorists of the speed limit than is the case in other jurisdictions.

Given the time, I will move onto the specific roads highlighted by the member for Southern River. I point out that if members of the public have an issue with a speed limit or speed zoning, they can call or write to Main Roads, which can reassess the particular area. Main Roads has provided me with information on the roads referred to by the member; I have not personally gone to check them out. If the member does not agree with Main Roads' advice, he has the right to ask for a reassessment; given some of the points he made, it is likely that he will not agree with all of this advice.

The advice I have received on Nicholson Road in Langford is that the posted speed limit for the residential section of Nicholson Road between High Road and Spencer Road was reduced from 70 kilometres an hour to 60 kilometres an hour on 26 March 2003. The 60-kilometre-an-hour speed zone was installed following safety concerns raised by residents living along this section of Nicholson Road about traffic, including heavy vehicles. The member says that the heavy vehicles are no longer there; perhaps that section needs to be reassessed.

Vahland Avenue is classified as a district distributor A road, connecting Leach Highway to High Road and South Street. Main Roads considers the 70-kilometre-an-hour speed limit on Vahland Avenue to be appropriate and in keeping with motorists' expectations. That is Main Roads' position at the moment.

The speed limit on Leach Highway between Shelley Bridge and Bull Creek Drive was reduced from 80 kilometres an hour to 70 kilometres an hour on 2 March 2004. Crash statistics show that there had been a significant number of crashes, especially rear-end crashes, along Leach Highway. Concerns had been expressed

by the community about the number and speed of heavy vehicles using the highway. There may be future plans to reduce traffic and that may —

Dr M.D. Nahan: That was for trucks.

Mr W.R. MARMION: Yes, trucks.

The reduction in the speed limit was part of a package of measures introduced to improve road safety along Leach Highway, including the installation of overhead mast arms at five signalised intersections, the installation of anti-skid intersection treatments at four locations and the review of all traffic signs along the highway.

I turn now to Mandurah; everyone has issues with traffic in Mandurah. There are only two posted speed limits on Mandurah Road through Mandurah town proper. When approaching Mandurah from the north, the speed limit before the intersection of Murdoch Drive and Allnutt Street is 80 kilometres an hour. The speed limit after that intersection is 70 kilometres an hour, continuing south through the more residentially developed areas of Mandurah, past Centro Mandurah shopping precinct and a children's guard crossing, across the narrowed Mandurah Estuary Bridge and through to the intersection of Casuarina Drive and Bower Drive, after which the speed limit is again 80 kilometres an hour. The speed limit again drops to 70 kilometres an hour through Falcon.