

Glanworth Curve - A Candle In The Dark

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A recent, fatal, loss-of-control collision in London, Ontario, Canada has led us to light a candle on some broader safety concerns.

On Saturday, February 11th, 2012 at approximately 1300 hours a sport utility vehicle (SUV) was travelling around a large "S" bend on the south edge of London. The vehicle was heading toward the city. The curve is well-known in the area as the Glanworth curve. The last portion of that curve involves a motion to the left. Unfortunately the SUV left the road to the right and struck a tree. A 38-year-old male occupant of the vehicle was fatally injured. A 15-month-old child was rushed to hospital but also perished. A 20-year-old driver and another 28-year-old passenger sustained non-life-threatening injuries.

The photo below was taken of the curve on the afternoon of February 12th, 2012 or just over 24 hours after the collision occurred.



The evidence of the condition of the road at the time of the collision was changed/destroyed by the time that the above photo was taken. Below are two photos of the area where the SUV left the right side of the road and struck a tree.



Below is a view of the actual tree that was struck.



Initially, the circumstances of this collision were not reported to the public. News media claimed that this was because police did not notify them. Yet popular social media were buzzing about rumours of a fatal collision involving children at the curve. The local newspaper in the City, The London Free Press (LFP), failed to even acknowledge that the main roadway where the collision occurred was closed, and would be closed for over nine hours.

When the fatal collision was acknowledged police would only confirm the obvious: a vehicle left the road, a tree was struck and there were two fatalities. This left news media, residents and various Londoners to speculate on possible causes and provide their solutions. Some news personnel informed the public that this was a typical scenario of too much speed, or that there were extreme weather conditions that had a role to play.

London Free Press Article

The London Free Press (LFP) newspaper quoted a resident on whose lawn the fatal collision occurred that recommended the installation of guard rails as the solution. The individual claimed that the City had ignored his pleas that a guard rail be installed. He indicated that about two to three vehicles a year end up on his lawn. In contrast, as per the LFP, London City Police indicated that, officially, there have been only seven reports of crashes in the area since 2003. Sergeant Tom O'Brien was quoted as saying "many instances of cars that spin off the road into the ditch go unreported" and "Lots of times, when somebody leaves a roadway, if they can get out themselves before police arrive, there's no report".

Furthermore, the LFP referred to an unidentified spokesperson for the City of London who said, to his knowledge, there have been no formal requests for a guardrail. The LFP quoted the spokesperson as saying that a guardrail would be installed if the hazard it protects against, is greater than risk of hitting the guard rail. "That would include a lake, a stream, a steep ditch or a pole. Generally, don't install them because hitting one is a thing, too". The unidentified spokesperson further indicated that the final police report will determine further action: "If the police came to us and said we should go there and have a look, we would certainly do that".

There are many concerns about these discussions; common themes that have revealed themselves in roadway assessment assignments that we conducted in the past. And so, we want to focus on some of these points.

The Information Black Hole

A primary concern is that there is an obvious lack of information made available about such important and dangerous events. Two persons lost their lives in this collision. Many fatalities have occurred throughout the years in the Province of Ontario under similar conditions where information was withheld about how and why a collision occurred. Information that is crucial to the general public's understanding and the general public's ability to inform their public representatives about what they believe is

important in dealing with fatal motor vehicle collisions. Instead, there is a Big Brother attitude that prevails where certain members of the police community, road maintenance authorities, City staff and Provincial transportation representatives essentially say that "We are the only ones who need to know how and why a collision occurred" and "We will tell you some general information such as whether or not someone died, but when it comes to information about why this occurred, this is none of the public's business".

It is no wonder that comments coming from the public about what should be done, or what solutions there should be, are devoid of basic understanding of the issues. A simple analogy: If we want our children to be able to read we teach them how to read. If we do not teach them how to read why should we be surprised when we hand them a book and they cannot comprehend its contents. It is that simple. The public must be educated about these very important matters because, to many members of the public it truly is a question of life and death. Education cannot come from someone simply telling the public that a fatal collision occurred without informing them about the facts around that collision and how those facts compare to the general population of occurrences.

With respect to the guard rail issue, yes, sometimes the installation of a barrier can cause an additional problem and the proper solution needs proper study. A guardrail is meant to redirect traffic and works best when impacted at a sharp angle. A guard rail placed at the location where the SUV left the road in this recent fatal collision would be struck at a very perpendicular angle and therefore a guard rail on its own may not be the exact solution. Yet, striking the guard rail would be preferable in almost every condition to striking a non-yielding narrow object like a tree. The impact of such an immovable tree means that the impact force is applied to a narrow portion of the striking vehicle and all the kinetic energy possessed by the vehicle would need to be dissipated by that vehicle's structure - essentially none of that energy would be dissipated by the tree. This causes immense stresses on the vehicle structure resulting in structural intrusion into the occupant space. We never want structural intrusion into an occupant space. Seat-belts, air bags and other safety devices cannot prevent your injury in many instances when there is structural intrusion.

But there are various impact attenuators that can work better than a guard rail, or in combination with a guard-rail to help the vehicle and occupants to ride down the collision forces over a longer time. It is not that the local resident at the accident site was completely wrong. He had the right idea, just not enough knowledge about a specific solution because he was never educated on the issue.

If we work on removing the "information black hole" that prevents our public's education, we will see that the public's greater knowledge will apply the correct pressure on its political representatives, pressure that makes sense, not a knee jerk reaction based on ignorance.

Police and Municipal Conflict of Interest

The very same agencies: the police, road maintenance authorities, City staff and Provincial transportation officials, who have control over the release of information about how and why a collision occurred also have a conflict of interest in reporting those facts. If the collision was the result of a roadway problem then it is these very same police, road maintenance authorities, City staff and Provincial transportation officials who could be found at fault and possibly liable for the collision consequences. Police investigators are the only ones who have the authority to examine a collision site when the evidence is there and available to be documented. They have a monopoly on that function. But they also have the responsibility of closing a road when weather conditions make that road unsafe. And if they have not closed a road when a road closure was required they can be held liable in a civil proceeding. Knowing whether police did their job properly would require the launch of a civil suit and request of any relevant documentation including photographs of a collision site. Examinations for Discovery would be required of the various officials involved. But if police do not take sufficient photographs of the site, or if they fail to document those issues that might place liability upon them then they stand to escape that liability. Surely, regardless of the good intentions and honourable actions of police, this process is ripe for abuse.

Similarly local road maintenance authorities have always had the responsibility of maintaining safe roads but they were always under the control and watchful eye of the Provincial regulator and policies that were standardized across the province. But changes were enacted by the Provincial Conservatives of the Mike Harris government. In many jurisdictions road maintenance was contracted out to private firms. Why? It was said that this would be cost saving. But others said that certain politicians wanted to circumvent the government's responsibility and their liability when a road was found unsafe and the way to get around the court rewards against the provincial government and municipalities was to place the responsibility of road maintenance onto smaller private firms who activities are more clandestine, in that their operations and procedures are less open to public scrutiny.

With the revision of the Municipal Act local governments also became the adjudicators of what safety policies would be applied in their local jurisdictions. These new powers to local municipalities, at a time when their finances were squeezed, also meant that budgets for road maintenance could be reduced if local politicians felt a budget crunch. Municipal staff, who are supposed to be the experts in road safety in their municipality can only follow the politicians' directions and must work with whatever budgets they are provided regardless of whether those budgets are insufficient, or in some instances dangerously insufficient.

Minimum Maintenance Standards (MMS) were developed that should have provided assurance that local municipalities would work to a minimum level of acceptable maintenance. Yet these same MMS are unabashedly referred to by defendants of municipalities as developed by themselves, specifically for defending municipalities and the Provincial Government against being successfully sued. The MMS have nothing to do with protecting the public and the developers of the standards openly admit to that.

It has come to the point where road safety has been pulled back to the "Wild Wild West" with minimal regulation and oversight. Where the sheriff's badge is pinned on any fool willing to take it, and death comes at noon in the middle of a fair gun fight.

Official Versus Non-Official Crashes

Our knowledge about motor vehicle accidents and road safety is now divided into reportable collisions that we can evaluate, and non-reportable collisions about which no one has any clue. As suggested by Sergeant Tom O'Brien earlier in this article, many single vehicle collisions are not reported because the drivers simply pull back onto the road and drive away. What Sergeant O'Brien did not indicate however is that there are many collisions involving substantial damage to vehicles, and injuries to occupants that are also not reported. We, as citizens of Ontario, have no information about how or why those collisions occurred because we decided that it would be a cost saving if police were not involved in documenting these incidents like they have for decades beforehand.

With respect to the Glanworth fatal collision, how good is our information about the safety of this curve when it is likely that many of the collisions occurring at this site are single vehicle events that are not reported to police. A vast majority of collisions are "property damage only" and a large number of these are also not reported. How much use will we gain from examining accident numbers and patterns when a large number of collisions are left unreported? But it is an age-old strategy to create false research and data simply to use it as the basis to do nothing.

The resident mentioned in the LFP article indicated two to three vehicles end up on his lawn every year. Is it possible that a similar number of vehicles also end up on his neighbour's lawns or on adjacent property? In other words, could the number of loss-of-control collisions actually be much more than two or three every year at this curve? Certainly it is possible since the loss of control of a vehicle can take similar but unique paths to final rest even though the cause is the same.

But let us be conservative. Let us say that there are only two to three collisions per year from 2003 to the end of 2011. This would be nine years and a total of 18 to 27 collisions versus the 7 collisions that are the official count reported by Sergeant O'Brien. Even by this conservative calculation we may not have any information about 60 to 75 percent of the loss of control collisions that might be happening at the Glanworth curve. Is that possible? We don't know. But this is the kind of information that should make the public scratch their heads and wonder.

Where is the Expertise?

The LFP article referred to the comment from the unidentified spokesperson for the City of London who stated that the final police report will determine further action: "If the police came to us and said we should go there and have a look, we would certainly do that".

This is a common comment we have heard before in our assessment of road safety issues.

The City of London must be responsible for hiring personnel that can take on the function of engineering a functional and safe road system. The City must go through all the steps of recognizing a need, producing plans, signing contracts and ensuring that that a road is built to proper specifications that are standard throughout North America. These personnel must also be able to examine the road system periodically and determine if adjustments and corrections are needed and how those will be made. The bottom line is that **City staff must be the experts** here.

But when we read the comments in the LFP article a different image is displayed. The unidentified City spokesperson defers to the expertise of the police. Note the wording: "The final police report will determine further action" . The City staff are waiting for the expertise of the police to tell them if there is a problem with the Glanworth Curve. But is it possible that the police could be the experts about the safety of the Glanworth Curve? The public does not readily appreciate what nonsense this wording really is.

What expertise do police have in determining the safety of a roadway. At the Ontario Police College in Aylmer they used to be given a "Traffic Law and Collision Investigation" course, but that is it. That course really relates to the Highway Traffic Act and how charges should be applied in relation to it.

But what do the police need to know to determine the safety of a roadway? There is the issue of road geometric design. There are various standards that are common throughout North America. I can guarantee that if I asked any officer in a 100 kilometre radius of London, Ontario none would be aware of the details of geometric design as provided in a guide such as the manual "A Policy On Geometric Design of Highways and Streets", 1994 which was the bible of the U.S. Nor would they be aware of the Ontario Manual called the "Geometric Design Standards for Ontario Roads". Why would that be important? Well, if there was a cross-slope on Glanworth Curve that was improper or if that cross-slope changed too dramatically through the curve then someone knowledgeable in geometric design would be aware of that. If the radius of the curve changed inappropriately such an individual would be aware of that, and so on. Similarly there are manuals on proper signage and maintenance, use of road surface materials and so on. The various standards or guidelines are in the process of being re-written in the Province of Ontario under a single set of manuals called the Ontario Traffic Manual. The Transportation Association of Canada (TAC) is a good resource in Canada. The Transportation Research Board (TRB) in the U.S. is an enormous resource for these details. We could go on but the point is that police are not experts, nor are they vaguely familiar with what constitutes a safe road.

We are not so naive as to believe that the City staff are unaware of that. We are familiar enough with these issues to know that there are personnel on the City staff who are very familiar with all these issues. Waiting for the police "expertise" to tell them if the Glanworth Curve is designed, signed and maintained to proper standards is far below the acceptable standard that should be tolerated, let alone the ethical issue of allowing

a possible life-threatening condition to exist, indicating that no action would be taken, and not making the public aware of their responsibility to be the experts in this regard.

We await what developments might take place in the next few days and whether the police will produce a properly detailed account of the road conditions that existed at the time that this unfortunate collision took the lives of two innocent people. In the meantime we reiterate, the staff at the City of London who are responsible for the safe conditions of any roadway in the City, must take action, independent of the police investigation, to affirm that the Glanworth Curve complies with all the safety standards and guidelines adhered to by all jurisdictions in Ontario.

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