

Malfunctioning Traffic Signal Not Reported In Police Investigation South of Sarnia, Ontario

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Congratulations are in order to the Sarnia Observer newspaper reporter who prepared a story regarding a collision that occurred just south of Sarnia, Monday, August 22, 2011 at the intersection of Highway 40 and Moore Line. Although the drivers of the two involved vehicles were not identified the reporter seemed to have performed some old-fashioned "digging" to find a nearby resident, Ken Jones, 68, who indicated that the traffic signal at the intersection had not been working properly for a week prior to the noted collision.

In the article, Jones described how the traffic signal continued to stay red for traffic on Moore Line and after waiting for a few minutes Jones turned away rather than pass through the intersection on a red. Jones was quoted as saying "It prompts people to go through. People aren't just going to sit there when there's no traffic coming".

The police investigation revealed that at approximately 7:30 a.m. a 21-year-old St. Clair Township woman was driving west on Moore Line and was struck by a dump truck that "proceeded on a red light". The woman had to be freed from her vehicle with the "jaws of life" and she was reported to be in fair condition at Bluewater Health. The Sarnia Observer reporter noted there was nothing in the OPP police investigation about faulty traffic signals.

The reporter apparently contacted the Ontario Ministry of Transportation and their spokesperson, Jill Miller was quoted as saying "...the electronic components of the traffic signal were damaged by a power strike, likely the result of a storm. Our maintenance contractor reviewed the operations of the intersection on Monday. The electronics were replaced on Tuesday, Aug, 23". Thus the replacement was made a day after the collision. Miller was quoted as saying "It doesn't appear that the traffic signal played any role in the Monday collision".

The Ontario Ministry of Transportation interpretation of the cause appears to be a game of semantics conjured up at the site of a 10-year-old's thief of Aunt Molly's pie. Similarly, the lack of revelation in the police investigation that there was a traffic signal malfunction is disturbing.

OPP Constable Liz Melvin was reported to state the obvious: "The investigation revealed that the dump truck proceeded on the red light". But surely there is more to the story if the traffic signal remained red and prevented drivers from passing through the intersection. The reporter noted that the dump truck driver, a 27-year-old Sarnia man, has been charged with careless driving.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that police reports such as these are compiled by researchers (TRAID data file) and they are used as the source for safety research studies that discuss the status of traffic safety in Ontario and Canada and these result in the policies that are set by these jurisdictions.

We rely on the official agencies such as the police, municipalities and Ontario Ministry of Transportation to work for the public's general good and to inform us with accurate information about what dangers lurk in our roadway environment. It is these agencies who have the exclusive right to document collisions before anyone else can do so. However, when the police are paid through the same pocket as the agencies who could be sued over a roadway or traffic signal problem then we should obviously make certain that this apparent conflict of interest does not affect the results of an investigation. Clearly cases like the present do sound the alarm.

If not for the tenacity of this Sarnia Observer reporter the public would be totally oblivious to these problems. This is the kind of reporting that is missing in almost all mass news media outlets and the Sarnia Observer should be congratulated for a job well done.