

Mount Salem Site of Fatality Reveals Complicated Traffic Issues

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It is always tragic when a life is cut short by any unexpected event. The more so when it is a young life cut short by an impaired driver.

Such was the case last week when Craig Chittenden was killed in a crash at the intersection of Springfield Road and Calton Line in Mount Salem, Ontario. It was a strange twist of fate that the collision occurred just before 0600 hours on a Sunday morning, at a time when you would expect very little traffic on the roads around this small town in rural Ontario.

And this was the scenario that revealed itself when we attended the site a few days later to evaluate what occurred. Arriving in the mid-afternoon we observed that the intersection was indeed relatively peaceful and quiet. Below is a photo, looking north, along Springfield Road, along the direction that Craig Chittenden travelled as he approached the intersection in the background.



And a similar view could be seen from the impaired driver's viewpoint as he travelled westbound on Calton Line toward the same intersection as shown in the photo below.



The oversize stop sign in the above photo was not enough for the impaired driver to indicate that he must stop and he entered the intersection at highway speed just as Chittenden's vehicle did so as well. In a single instant many persons' lives changed.

We observed that the westbound traffic stop bar was positioned very far back from the intersection and we wondered how drivers adjusted to this unusual position. So we set-up a number of video cameras and began documenting the time required for westbound vehicles to clear the intersection. While this taping was taking place we stood by and observed the developments and several facts began to unfold.

By approximately 1515 hours a number of school buses began to pass through the area and some of these buses stopped to let off passengers. Suddenly this increased the number of pedestrians in the area. Some of these unsupervised pre-teens fooled around and jumped onto the road as they walked home. At the same time a lonely looking variety store located on the south west corner of the intersection, had hardly seen any customers in the first hour or two that we stood at the site. But shortly after 1500 hours a number of vehicles began stopping in the gravel area in front of the store, as shown in the top photo of the following page. This started as just a single vehicle but

as the minutes passed many drivers began their attempts stop on this gravel area, as shown in the bottom photo below.



As one vehicle exited the area another was ready to take its spot as shown in the photo below.



Such a calamity seemed to be the norm. Yet, eastbound drivers who stopped at the intersection would need to see through this maze in order to determine with it was safe to enter the intersection. The photo below is an example of such an eastbound driver trying to look past the parked vehicles.



We noticed several close calls where we thought that maybe one driver was not going to see the other and a crash would take place. But common sense and accommodation seemed to win out as drivers appeared to be accustomed to this daily activity and knew what needed to be looked out for. Accommodation is a wonder thing, and when everyone recognizes and understands the hazards they can, and do, accommodate.

Over at the westbound traffic stop bar we observed as vehicles came to a stop, some at the stop bar and others past it. The photo below is a view looking northward at the westbound stop bar and you can see how far back it is from Springfield Road.



And on the following page you can see a westbound school bus as its driver tries to deal with making a turn or travelling straight ahead from a position well past the traffic stop bar. You are required by law to stop at the bar but what you do afterwards to make a safe crossing or entrance of the intersecting road is up to you.

In all these examples, whether it is children entering the road, vehicles parked to block the line of sight, or roadway markings that could make it difficult for drivers to pass through an intersection, accommodation is what saves the day. Drivers become familiar with the difficulties and adjust their driving to accommodate to the circumstances.

Unfortunately it is difficult to anticipate that a drunk driver will travel through a stop sign at 0600 hours on a Sunday morning.



We can never tell when we will be the ones travelling on that Sunday morning, or any morning, or any day of the week, or any day of the year. Unexpected events can and do take place, it is just that they are rare. The best that we can do is to force new habits upon ourselves that can help us when those unexpected things happen. One of the biggest things from my viewpoint is something called vigilance. Simply paying attention to your driving and the traffic around you. Vigilance means making it a habit to keep your mind alert to your driving task. That is no small feat when you are late for work, your child is crying in the back seat or you are just steamed over some imbecile because of this or that. I am not here to preach, but just consider the facts that have been presented. Make that one little, greater effort each day and try to focus.