

Off The Road, Death By Design

There's a story about a dentist who examined a patient, shook his head sadly and said: "Your teeth are all right, but those gums have to go."

What Congressman Jack McDonald is saying is that our roads are pretty well designed, but the roadsides are incredibly dangerous.

Highway designers have neglected, McDonald says, what can happen to the motorist who, because of accident or his own negligence, suddenly leaves the highway.

"In hearings before the special subcommittee on the federal aid highway program," the Redford Republican said in a House speech, "we have heard experts testify that some 16,000 lives could be saved (out of 50,000 highway deaths in 1966) if the off-road portion of the highway was designed and constructed with the same degree of safety as the roadway itself."

So McDonald introduced a bill giving the Department of Transportation a congressional mandate to issue directives requiring better design of the area off the road. The penalty for failure to comply: Withholding of federal highway aid.

WHAT KINDS OF HAZARDS was McDonald talking about?

● "Guardrails that constitute hazards because of improper location or installation."

● "Guardrails that protect highway structures from damage rather than motorists from death."

● "Culverts and bridge piers so located as to kill people who, perhaps momentarily, lose control of their car and leave the road."

● "Ditches and cut-and-fill banks so

steep and so close to the highway as to make it virtually impossible for a driver to, avoid overturning if he leaves the traveled lanes."

● "Unnecessary signs which can kill motorists who run into them."

● "Trees and other highway beautification projects placed in such an indiscriminate manner as to pose hazards."

BUT AREN'T THOSE hazards in other states? Are Michigan's highways that bad?

Well, we took a trip with the congressman one day last week, starting from his 19th District office located in downtown Farmington. Within five miles from the starting point, McDonald pointed to one example after another of what he called poor off-the-road design.

They were things one had seen dozens of times but never really noticed. "It's so obvious when you think about it," McDonald said.

"I could show you 400 examples between here and Lansing. Or take the Edsel Ford and Lodge freeways in Detroit—the light poles are battered all the time, and you can always see the last two or three days damage that they haven't repaired yet."

"In one year, 16,000 deaths could be averted by better design off-the-roads. In Viet Nam, we've had 12,000 war deaths in four years."

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"There are three poles close to the road, and one is in a new two-foot-wide base. A driver going by is within inches of death. They own all this property up to a foot the other side of the sidewalk, so

they have an extra 40 feet where they could have put those signs." Scene: Northeast corner of Farmington Road and Nine Mile with I-96 in background.

Haggerty Rd

"Two faults here. First, here's a sign within a few feet of the roadway. The sign is embedded in concrete, and this type of sign costs about \$2,000. A break-away sign would be cheaper, or the sign should be well off the road. Second, a rail had to be put up to protect the sign—not the motorist. The front of the guard rail (toward camera) has a knife-edge. It should be flared and the edge buried. I have a picture in Washington, D.C., where over 75 feet of this kind of rail have gone into a car." Scene: I-96 in Farmington.

"Here's a glaring example of misuse of a guard rail. A driver going off the road would be forced by the rail into this concrete abutment. The rail should go out to the front of the abutment, not into the side." Scene: I-96 in Farmington.

"This is a good attempt at a guard rail, because it doesn't go into the bridge pier. But the pier is much too close to the road. The cost of this is only slightly less than to use a stronger steel and a wider bridge span. That would keep the pier away from the road." Scene: I-96 at the Haggerty Road overpass, Farmington Township.

"All these light poles along Farmington Road going into town are within two feet of the road; they're all too close. Look! This one here has already been hit." Scene: Farmington Road between Nine Mile and Grand River.

Left: "This bank is too steep. A car going up it would tip over. If there were a gentler slope, the car would come down onto the shoulder again without tipping." Scene: I-96 in western Farmington Township.

"Terrible. That sign is right out where it can be hit. That post can also be hit. That drain (lower right) ought to be filled up and tiled so that the driver wouldn't go into the ditch." Scene: I-96 at Novi exit.