

'Driven' society makes safety a top concern

BY NANCY SUNDSTROM
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"There's a lot you have to put up with when driving. For example, the other cars. Thousands of these other cars, many of which have people who have licenses apparently."
— George Carlin

Humor aside, there's much more to driving than knowing the rules of the road, keeping the gas tank full and attending to insurance, payments and maintenance.

With so many other drivers on the roads today, is driving safe anymore?

The bottom line is that safe driving is easy to learn, but bad driving habits are hard to break. In today's world, it's more critical than ever to be a defensive driver who can anticipate potentially dangerous situations.

Jack Peet, a safety consultant with AAA Michigan, said that if there is a single message he tries to stress in any of his presentations, it's that there's no substitute for common sense and being proactive when it comes to driving.

"There will always be the unexpected, but there's a lot we can prepare ourselves for and have to be aware of," said Peet. "There's been a dramatic increase in the number of registered drivers, vehicles and miles driven and it's all being done on virtually the same amount of road. Add to it that people are driving when they're drowsy, inebriated, distracted or frustrated, and the situation becomes even more complex.

"Most (hazards) are common sense reminders, but we need to force ourselves to slow down and think about them so that if

you are in a potentially troublesome situation, you have your best chance of resolving it."

Peet said that there's a lot of discussion these days focused on accidents caused by cell phone users. However, phones are actually much further down the list, he said, behind other factors like conversing with other passengers, eating and using electronic devices like CD players. All of these things have become more socially acceptable to do in a car, but Peet suggested that actions like putting in the CD before driving, looking at a map at a time other than when you're behind the wheel, or working to avoid animated conversations with others while navigating traffic are smart.

"It used to be that we would get in our cars, drive to work and then start work, but now,

many people are working on their way to work," said Peet. "Another example is that there's more commuter time, which people see as downtime and so they try to find other things to do while driving. And statistics show that especially for young people, the chances of an accident double with the more people who are in a car, because it creates the potential for more distraction."

When it comes to being a more defensive, educated driver in general, Peet suggested employing the Golden Rule, i.e. if you think that your actions on the road might irritate you, they will probably irritate others. Aggressive driving and road rage on the part of others often force some drivers to change how they're driving, but Pete says that it's critical to not let others dictate how you should be driving.

Peet's peer at AAA is Fred Doelker, their field community relations administrator. He stressed two points — the importance of buckling up, as the law dictates, and the use of appropriate booster seats for youngsters, something many parents do not comply with primarily because of inconvenience or not knowing the rules for using them.

Both Doelker and Peet say there are good Web sites for education on all driving topics provided by AAA of Michigan and the National Highway Traffic Administration, among others. Peet also encourages anyone with a question to e-mail him at jcpeet@aaamichigan.com or to phone (800) 332-0552, Ext. 31484.

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