



Speed a sensitive issue for some road users

ON THE ROAD

with John Williamson



The conversation went something like this: “I got a speeding ticket on the way up here,” she said. “Yes — and I think we should appeal the ticket,” he said. “It was a straight piece of road, not a passing lane, and she pulled out, passed the truck quickly and pulled straight back into her lane. She minimised the time she spent on the wrong side of the road, wasn’t a danger to anyone and the cop was waiting on the side road,” he concluded.

Right then, I could understand the rationale of the situation — of an apparently safe passing manoeuvre on a clear road, no other vehicle there and doing it in a vehicle which had all possible safety features built into it — so what was the problem? Then, I asked the question: “What speed were you clocked at?” “135km/h,” was the indignant reply.

At this stage the conversation kind of petered out with my comment. “You are lucky that you’ve still got a licence — another 5km/h and you wouldn’t be driving for 28 days.”

I guess I was a bit surprised that being caught at that speed could have any sort of rightness about it and what sort of appeal case could be constructed? It is perhaps understandable, though, that if you are in cruise control and take it out to pass a vehicle, you are concentrating on the manoeuvre itself, not looking at the speedo and you may not be aware of the speed you are travelling at.

The question of what are the most appropriate speeds for our roads is about to become a serious conversation as road controlling authorities around the country are asked to implement the newly released Speed Management Guide.

It was fascinating to attend an NZAA workshop in Wellington a couple of weeks ago to hear just how sensitive and wide ranging the opinions are about the speed we are allowed to drive.

The setting of enforceable speed limits on our roads are the preserve of the owners of those roads — the New Zealand Transport Agency for our state highways and the 67 territorial authorities throughout New Zealand for local roads. These limits are established within the Land Transport Rule Setting of Speed Limits 2003. This is a very prescriptive process which tends to focus on parts of a road rather than characteristics of the whole road. The default limits are 100km/h on the open road and 50km/h in an urban environment. The posted speed limit is the maximum you can travel at in perfect conditions.

But the legal limit is one thing — it’s the interpretation of the perfect road and perfect conditions which tends to polarise thought. One end of the continuum says,

“I know how fast I can safely drive — it’s the other drivers that cause the problem.”

The other end of the spectrum says, “We know that speeding is dangerous. But other factors are to blame. Slowing me down won’t solve the problem.”

Somewhere in the middle is the position that, “Some roads are hard to read. Help me read the road because some roads are not safe to drive at current limits.”

Even within this though, there are different perspectives. Some people think speed is good and enjoy driving fast. Trying to limit this group can be politically fraught for the politicians who eventually make the decision. Road engineering, on the other hand, know that higher driving speeds cause the road to deteriorate faster and that lower speeds mean lower maintenance costs and reduced need for engineering upgrades — and there’s only so much money to go

around.

The AA position endeavours to capture the common sense, every day user of the road perspective and says, “We want people and goods to be able to move quickly and easily but at speeds that are safe and make sense to people.”

It is this sense making that the new Speed Management Guide is all about. To make sense to us we need to be part of the conversation and to be engaged in the rationale for any change of speed limit on all of our roads. NZTA and the district councils have got a whole lot of data about every road in the country. They are charged with prioritising the top 5 per cent each year of the road improvements which will deliver the best benefits in terms of engineering and speed limit changes.

Look out for a speed limit conversation on a road near you. Drive safely. Enjoy your driving and share the road.

■ John Williamson is chairman of Roadsaf Northland and Northland Road Safety Trust, a former national councillor for NZ Automobile Association and former Whangarei District Council member.



LOOK out for a speed limit conversation on a road near you.

PHOTO/FILE