

Artificial intelligence hits the road

A non-partisan coalition will announce a major improvement to Canada's traffic infrastructure on Thursday.

The Smart Signs Initiative (SSI), backed by the auto industry, motorist associations, and law enforcement agencies, will be fully implemented by 2007. Proponents cite many benefits, including big savings in law enforcement budgets, a drop in highway deaths and dismemberments, a slowdown of global warming caused by greenhouse gas emissions – and significantly lower auto insurance rates.

The Smart Signs Initiative builds on recent advances in wireless communications and the on-board computers that are now an integral part of new cars. Auto consultant Domela Davitti explains the basic idea:

“SSI just brings ‘cruise control’ into the 21st century. We’re now able to attach a wireless transmitter to all those formerly useless speed limit signs. The SSI chip sends a signal to the cruise control chip in your car, setting the current maximum speed.”

Canadian Car Association spokesperson Harris Podratz enthuses, “For drivers, SSI makes things so easy! You turn onto a country road, where the speed limit is 80, and the smart signs automatically set your cruise control at 80. When you come into a town, and the signs say 60, your car just slows down to 60, without any effort on your part.”

“Our members are really excited that we won’t have to worry about speeding tickets anymore, because our cars will automatically comply with the posted limits.”

That sounds great, but what about emergencies? After all, every single one of us knows someone who once knew someone who once had to step on the gas, to rush to the hospital to save a heart attack victim from an otherwise certain death.

The SSI technology not only *allows*, but actually *facilitates*, such emergency response, because two-way communication is built into chips in the cars and the signs. Again, Davitti explains how it will work:

“The SSI control panel has a clearly

marked manual override switch. If you’ve got an emergency, you just flip that switch, and your cruise control is released. At the same time, your SSI chip sends out a signal, so police cars can quickly arrive to provide a safe escort. The road signs help to track your progress, so the emergency services don’t have to waste time finding you.”

Ontario Provincial Police head Franklin Golaudy says that if drivers use the manual override, but can’t show that there was a real emergency, they will be assessed the full cost of the police escort. Abuses will be expensive, and therefore rare, and until assessed costs are paid in full, the SSI chips will prevent the offending driver from starting the engine again. Golaudy welcomes the day when handing out speeding tickets to irate motorists will be just a bad memory for OPP employees.

“I recognize that the budget for our traffic division may be cut dramatically,” Golaudy says. “But our officers feel that if lives can be saved through a quick fix for speeding, that’s great – even if a few of us get laid off. So we’re behind this 140 percent.”

While the technology is simple and low cost, civil servants have been working overtime to overhaul the web of traffic regulations in time for tomorrow’s SSI rollout. And elected officials admit they have fielded a few angry calls from fringe elements in their constituencies, who complain that SSI will violate individual privacy rights.

But in an unprecedented show of unity, leaders of the Liberals, Conservatives, New Democrats, Bloc Québécois, Green Party and Natural Law Party all put their signatures to the press release announcing SSI.

“Responsible voters in our country,” the document says, “don’t believe anybody has a ‘right to privacy’ when piloting a huge chunk of metal along public roads at illegal speeds. So we’re proud to be introducing the Smart Signs Initiative, and we’re confident voters will remember April 1, 2004, as the day we brought sanity back to our roads.”



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