

authority's mandate.

IRF is taking the debate one step further in a session programmed at the World Road Congress, organised jointly with PIARC, and entitled Managing Roads for the Customer. The session will highlight how change has been brought about, the kind of decisions made and the steps taken, with case studies of new road

management models from industrialised and developing countries alike.

Roads are enormous national assets. They have a major role to play in economic growth and social development. Governments throughout the world have the responsibility to develop customer-oriented business models to manage these vital assets, maintain them, upgrade them

and develop them in order to reap the maximum return on taxpayer investment ■

● Dana Low is chairman of the IRF

**La Route en France 2002.*

***Figures based on reconstruction costs of pre-existing infrastructure.*

Please! Stop blaming the driver!

Pick up any newspaper and look at the most recent story on road safety. The journalist will undoubtedly have focused on the driver, and on solutions to modify driver behavior, whether speed cameras, greater enforcement, and so on. The assumption will somehow be made that accidents and their frequently dramatic consequences are solely the result of human behavior. Insurance claims will probably be made on the same basis.

In very few cases, a newspaper text will identify the road network itself as principal culprit. Yet every driver has probably found him or herself at one time or another faced with a road situation where the perception of danger was too late, markings were inadequate, signs were difficult to read or imprecise or any number of other road features creating a hazard for even the most careful citizen.

Certain developments in the science of road safety show that things may gradually be changing. A couple of years back, a front-page story in the London *Financial Times* finally found another culprit. The article, entitled "Portugal's Highways of Death", bears witness to the fact that the safety record of some roads is so poor that even the most alert drivers might easily find themselves in trouble. Evidence has also come to light that faulty vehicle design combined with incompatible equipment, such as tires can lead to accidents with fatal consequences in extreme and unforeseen conditions.

Today, the IRF is pleased to see that a move is underway to reverse the trend of years and look at improving safety on road

transport systems as a joint effort between its component parts: yes, motorists must obey the rules, and drive within the appropriate limits; and yes, vehicle manufacturers must respect the technical safety standards. But road authorities also have a responsibility to make constant assessments of the safety performance of the road networks under their jurisdiction and engage a process of continual improvement.

In some local networks, this may mean little more than common sense low cost measures such as cutting back hedges that diminish visibility, removing hard objects from road verges, or placing new, better performing road signs more in advance of potential hazards.

In others, it may mean upgrading the maintenance schedule, refreshing and improving markings and where necessary removing "message ambiguity, using higher quality materials, resurfacing with skid-proof finishes and so on.

Some programmes, notably the *Vision Zero* concept developed in Scandinavia, call for active road safety features to be installed. They have evolved from the idea of programming human error into design, based on the idea that other industries, such as the nuclear power and aircraft industries automatically integrate safeguards at the design stage.

There is also a model, drawn from the motor industry itself, which can also be of use to decision makers: formula one racing. Here, we have a whole variety of designs and novel safety features integrated into racing tracks in order to mitigate the consequences of a driver leaving the road at high speed. And there

is a model drawn from the road network itself - that of escape lanes constructed on motorways to allow heavy trucks to come to a halt following brake failure on a steep incline.

The reasoning behind these new safety models is that human beings are prone to make errors, that accidents will happen, and that the best way of improving road safety is to make the road network as forgiving of human error as possible.

Effort is therefore directed less at reducing the total number of accidents and more at reducing to a minimum the possible catastrophic consequences of accidents and their costs, both in human

'the IRF is pleased to see that a move is underway to reverse the trend of years and look at improving safety on the road transport systems' - Michael Bernhard

suffering and to society: EU estimates put the cost of a single road death at E1 million (about US\$1 million). In fact, the European Union's planned 50% reduction in the number of road accidents and their consequences could generate huge funds for road infrastructure improvement.

The IRF will be launching the debate on this new approach through a discussion document entitled *Safe Mobility*, to be presented at a special joint IRF/PIARC session to be held during the World Road Congress in Durban. IRF submits the paper, formulated by public and private sector road safety experts from among its membership, to a wider public for reflection and consideration in the belief that policy makers will draw inspiration from its analysis and recommendations in their efforts to save lives and reduce suffering caused by road accidents ■

**Michael Bernhard, Vice-chairman of IRF Geneva, served as Traffic Engineer in Switzerland (Canton of Vaud), as economist at the Transport Division of the UN Economic Commission for Europe and spent 20 years at 3M Europe, Traffic Control Materials. He is now retired and consults on transport safety matters.*

Europe cuts road deaths

While road safety in 2002 improved quite a lot in Western European countries there was virtually no change in the situation in Central and Eastern Europe. In CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries, however, road safety again deteriorated significantly.

In Western Europe the number of road traffic fatalities declined in 2002 by nearly 3.5%, the best result since 1996. This positive news is strengthened by the fact that in 2002 the number of injured decreased by 4.6% and the number of accidents by 4.2%, the steepest drop in years.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the number of fatalities increased by 0.3% in 2002, a result that put an end to the significant improvement observed in 2000 (-4.8%) and 2001 (-4.7%). Conversely the number of injured slightly decreased (-0.1%) as more markedly did the number of accidents (-2.3%).

Once again the CIS was confronted in 2002 with a rise in the number of people killed on the roads (6.5%). Significant increases were also seen in the number of persons injured (+12.9%) and in the number of accidents (+10.1%), the worst results observed in these countries since 1990.