

Judie Stone

Good morning. I am Judie Stone, president of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety. We are here today to discuss some of the most important auto safety policy issues to be considered by the U.S. Congress since federal motor carrier safety standards were created in the 1960s, and to share some significant new polling data that is highly relevant.

In 2003, preliminary federal data indicates we experienced the highest number of fatalities since 1990, and for four years in a row, those numbers have been rising.

There are some specific vehicle safety problem areas that are contributing to this rising death and injury toll, and Advocates is urging Congress to approve solutions to these problems that reside in the Senate version of a six-year, multi-billion dollar highway authorization bill, dubbed SAFETEA by the Administration. Differences between House and Senate safety bills are currently being hammered out in a conference committee

And there are specific technologies, available right now, that can address many of these vehicle design issues.

We want the Senate provisions to prevail that direct the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to take on issues such as rollover prevention, roof crush protection, side impact improvement and ejection prevention, because they will accelerate the pace of standard safety equipment advances for new car buyers across American car dealerships, and because they will save many lives and dollars.

That said, this is a unique moment in time. There are enormous amounts of money involved in SAFETEA, but they are primarily for building and restoring roads – approximately \$275 BILLION over 6 years. Ironically, motor vehicle crashes cost American taxpayers \$230 BILLION per year, totaling \$1.38 TRILLION over the same period. We call this societal burden the “Crash Tax” because each and every American helps pay this enormous bill, year in and out. Motor vehicle crashes are a costly public health epidemic.

Unfortunately, motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death in the nation for people between the ages of 1 and 34. Resources to address auto safety problems are scarce, and many seem oblivious to the fact that the more than 43,000 deaths and 3 million injuries each year are a major economic drain on our society’s economy, health and well being.

You might even say that it’s as though cures for this epidemic are locked up in a huge medicine chest, and the only people with keys are the government and the auto industry. They decide when and to whom to dispense the vaccines – not to every American who needs them, but usually first to those high-end, expensive cars. In this country, we don’t withhold vaccines for polio or tuberculosis based on who can afford them. Nor should we provide safety as an option on new cars.

This year, this moment in time, will Congress see this as a turning point for highway safety, or will they take a detour, make a U-Turn? There is a golden opportunity before Congress right now to restore wasted dollars to the national treasury and assure all future American motorists that the technological safety vaccines are available to all of them.

They will have wasted a unique opportunity if they do not adopt the Senate safety provisions in the SAFETEA bill.