

\$1B tag on collisions

by **GLENN COOK**

Saint City News

Motor vehicle collisions are costing the Capital Region alone almost \$1 billion a year in direct costs, plus untold indirect costs, officials said this week.

The Capital Region Intersection Safety Partnership (CRISP) released the findings of their collision cost study Wednesday at the Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital in Edmonton, which pegged the cost of collisions in Edmonton, St. Albert, Sherwood Park, Devon, Fort Saskatchewan, Leduc, Spruce Grove and Stony Plain at more than \$900 million for 2007.

St. Albert Fire Services paramedic and firefighter Jeff Austin spoke to the assembled media at the Glenrose about the dangers faced by first responders at crash scenes, and said he's not surprised to hear the monetary value of collisions is so high.

"The majority of all trauma calls we go to are motor vehicle collisions, and a lot of our time and resources are tied up in that," Austin said.

"It can tie up a lot of resources and cost a lot of money."

That strain is amplified in a small emergency services unit like St. Albert's, where only three fire engines, one rescue truck and two ambulances are normally available to respond to calls.

"A lot of these motor vehicle collisions tie up more than one ambulance, but even one ambulance is 50 per cent of our resources, and they can tie up almost 50 per cent of our fire resources, which makes it so we can't respond as quickly and efficiently to fire calls or the rest of our duties," he said.

CRISP chair Gerry Shimko estimated that the cost of a fatal motor vehicle collision would be \$180,000, while an injury collision would cost \$40,000 and one that only involves property damage would average around \$11,000.

"We believe that's only the tip of the iceberg ... Collision costs are much more than a trip to the body shop or in an ambulance. We also pay indirect costs in grief, pain and suffering," Shimko said.

Cpl. Don Murray, head of traffic services for the St. Albert RCMP detachment, echoed Austin's lack of surprise when it comes to the overall price tag.

"The cost of a collision has a huge ripple effect on society," he said.

Not only does a collision have concrete monetary costs, it also takes a great toll on the emotions of those involved, something Murray and the RCMP see first-hand on scene.

"We not only have the collision investigation to deal with, but we see the aftermath after, the emotional toll on the families and the victims themselves," he said.

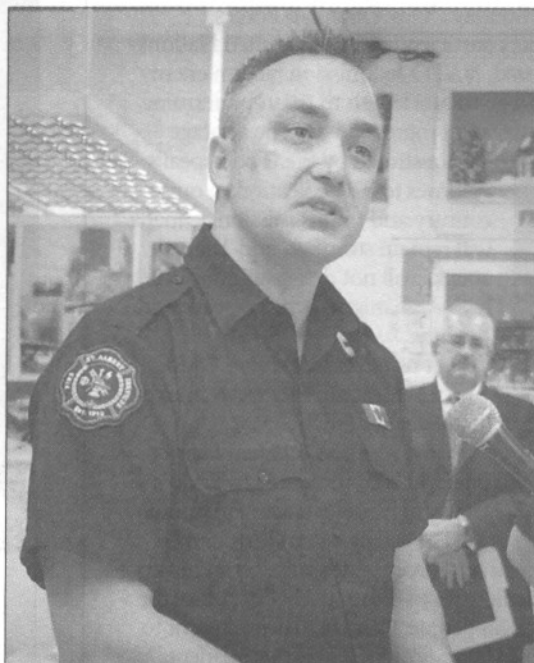


PHOTO BY GLENN COOK, SAINT CITY NEWS

St. Albert Fire Services member Jeff Austin speaks to the media at the Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital in Edmonton on Wednesday.

Several speakers took the podium Wednesday to talk about how collisions affect their day-to-day work, including an emergency dispatcher, a collision investigator, a tow truck driver, an occupational therapist and a victim services volunteer.

"We can spend literally hours trying to resuscitate and stabilize these patients, and the sad reality is that sometimes we don't succeed," said Dr. Bill Sevcik, emergency physician at the University of Alberta

Hospital. "Precious lives are wasted; families and communities are forever changed."

"It's also my job to tell the family the terrible news," Sevcik added, "and, without lying, it's the single hardest part of my job. When the injuries are preventable, delivering

that bad news is even worse."

Austin added that features designed to keep passengers safe in a collision are actually putting firefighters in greater danger.

"There are more sensors, airbags and detonators for those airbags that are injuring responders every year," he said. "We can no longer just use the jaws of life or hydraulic tools to pry people out of [cars]."

If there's one message that Austin and Murray would want to make sure drivers in the Capital Region get in order to bring those numbers down, it would be to pay more attention.

"People have to take a deep breath and slow down ... To get to your destination 30 seconds sooner, it's just not worth the risk you're taking," Murray said.

We believe that's only the tip of the iceberg.

» Gerry Shimko,
CRISP chair