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Haysville tops list of safest cities in Kansas for driving

Derby, Andover also get high marks for low accident rates

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Haysville Police Chief Mike McElroy struggled to recall the last traffic death that occurred in his city. He called his lieutenant.

"Do you remember our last traffic fatality?" he asked. "Was it that one in the crosswalk at Grand and Main?"

"You don't remember any in the 13 years you've been here?"

Serious traffic accidents indeed are rare in Haysville. Kansas Department of Transportation records show it's among the safest places to drive in Kansas.

Of the 37 Kansas cities with more than 10,000 residents, none averaged fewer traffic accidents per capita from 2004 through 2008.

Haysville was the only city that size that recorded no traffic fatalities during that time.

Haysville had 30.8 accidents per 1,000 residents during the five-year period — about half the number of the Johnson County city of Gardner, which had the second-lowest total.

Two Wichita-area cities — Derby and Andover — were the only other cities with 10,000 residents that had fewer than 70 accidents per 1,000 residents.

Six cities — Atchison, El Dorado, Gardner, Great Bend, Lansing and McPherson — recorded only one traffic fatality from 2004 through 2008.

Wichita, by comparison, recorded 144 traffic deaths during that time and had 114 accidents per 1,000 residents.

Traffic safety officials typically track accidents and fatalities on the basis of vehicle miles driven. But the per capita figures offer a rough estimate of the chances of getting involved in an accident in any given city.

Eastborough and Benton both had 806 residents in 2008, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. But residents of Eastborough, which is a busy conduit to Towne East Square, face more hazardous driving conditions.

Eastborough had 86.8 accidents per 1,000 residents from 2004 through 2008. Benton, which is just off K-254 in northwest Butler County, had 18.6.

Three smaller area cities — Bentley, Cheney and Elbing — had fewer than 10 accidents per 1,000 residents.

In general, the figures show, the larger the city, the higher the accident rate. The metropolitan area's second- and third-largest cities — El Dorado and Newton — were the only cities besides Wichita to have more than 100 accidents per 1,000 residents.

Making streets safer

McElroy and those who regularly drive Haysville streets said there are several reasons why the roads there are relatively safe.

* Residential speed limits are 20 mph — 10 mph lower than the limits you'll see in Wichita and many other Kansas cities.

* Most of Haysville's major intersections are relatively new and equipped with modern leftturn signals and turn lanes.

* There are no unmarked intersections in the city. Every crossing — even the ones in residential areas — is marked with at least a yield sign.

* Haysville's small-town atmosphere breeds courteous drivers. Drivers tend to be more considerate when they know they're sharing the road with neighbors. Larry Daniel, who grew up in Haysville, said there's one other factor. "It's 'cause we're good drivers," he joked as he finished washing his truck at the Colt Car Wash last week. Daniel lives in Oatville but is a regular visitor to Haysville, where one of his sons lives. He said he's never had an accident here.

"No wrecks, and I never got a ticket in Haysville, either," he said.

Daniel credited well-maintained streets and the low residential speed limits for the good safety record.

Jim Parks of Clearwater, who was washing his car at the same car wash, is another regular visitor.

"I drive through town all the time and I've never had an accident in Haysville," he said. "My wife backed this car into that pole right there," he said as he nodded to the black pole holding up the car wash sign. "But as far as being on the road, I've never had any problems."

A tour of the city

McElroy offered his "nickel tour" of Haysville last week.

"I'm driving 30 right now, and you don't see lot of people zipping by," he said as he drove east on Grand. "Most people either drive the speed limit or go a little quicker."

The cars around him maintained about the same speed. The driver of a Mercury Mountaineer, who passed McElroy doing 35 mph, came the closest to flouting traffic laws.

Haysville police records show that the 26-member department this year has averaged 8.1 traffic stops a day and issued 3.4 tickets.

"We try not to be overaggressive, but we do want to maintain compliance with traffic laws," McElroy said.

He said the department tries to write 50 percent of its tickets in "traffic enforcement zones," which are rotated on a weekly basis.

The zones last week were on Broadway, Turkel, Corey and Stewart. He said the zones are designed to cover all parts of the city, but he said complaints sometimes dictate where they will be.

Haysville borders the south edge of Wichita, and takes in 4½ square miles of land distributed around the heart of the city, at Seneca and Grand.

At the west end of town, Meridian serves as a major artery into Wichita. In the center of town, Seneca performs the same function. On the east side of town, Broadway — U.S. 81 — connects the two cities.

At the far east end of town is Hydraulic, which has been closed as construction crews replace a bridge over the Big Ditch.

McElroy gives some credit for his city's safety record to the Public Works Department for keeping up the streets. He said the extensive work on major intersections also helps.

"Between that and citizens trying to be safe, it's just kind of a combination," he said.

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