



Q & A
with

Vic Lund

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Q: What are the biggest safety challenges on rural roads in St. Louis County?

A: Our number one rural safety issue is single-vehicle roadway departure crashes — vehicles running off the road. That type of crash generates the most serious crashes on our rural system, just like it does across Minnesota and nationally. In northeast Minnesota, we actually see an overrepresentation of those crashes compared to the rest of the state.

Our second major challenge is intersection crashes, especially at state-county intersections. Those tend to generate serious crashes as well. So if I had to summarize it, it's keeping vehicles in their lane and improving safety at key intersections.



Vic Lund

Q: Why are 90% of serious crashes happening on paved roads when half the system is gravel?

A: In St. Louis County, about half our roads are paved and half are gravel, but 90% of serious crashes happen on the paved system. There are a few reasons for that.

First is exposure — paved roads generally carry more traffic, and more vehicles mean more risk. Second is speed. Paved roads support higher speeds, and even a small mistake at higher speeds can lead to catastrophic results. Third is roadway design. Many of our paved roads were built more than 100 years ago, and we're still using that same cross section. The roadsides often aren't engineered with forgiving clear zones, so when a vehicle runs off the road, there's less room for recovery. Those factors together explain why serious crashes are overrepresented on paved roads.

Q: How do you address safety on gravel roads when your toolbox is limited?

A: It's important to understand that only about 10% of our serious crashes occur on the gravel system, even though it makes up half our mileage. That tells us paved roads carry more risk overall. But that doesn't mean we ignore gravel roads.

On gravel roads, curve signing is one of our primary strategies. If there's a sharp curve — especially a 90-degree curve — we make sure it's properly delineated with warning signs and chevrons. Run-off-the-road crashes often occur in curves, so signing matters.

We also focus on roadside clearing to improve recovery space. And good maintenance is critical. Through our Gravel Road Improvement Program, or GRIP, we strengthen the surface using treatments like calcium chloride. That reduces dust, improves ride quality, and strengthens the road so it needs less grading. So while our toolbox is smaller on gravel, we still have meaningful strategies.

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Q: Why do you use a risk-based, proactive approach instead of just relying on crash history?

A: Traditionally, safety investments are based on crash history — we look backward in time. That approach is useful, and we still use it, but it requires something bad to happen before we act.

A proactive approach uses risk. Risk is developed from crash data, but it identifies roadway features correlated with future serious crashes. It's similar to how a doctor looks at your health history to identify risks before disease develops.

Just because there haven't been crashes at a location doesn't mean there's no risk. I've had residents question curve signing because they'd never seen a crash there in 50 years. But if the curve radius, traffic volume, and nearby features indicate elevated risk, we treat it before something serious happens. That gives me confidence that we're putting limited safety dollars in the right places at the right time.

Q: What gives you hope that zero traffic deaths are possible?

A: When I first heard about Minnesota's Toward Zero Deaths initiative early in my career, I honestly thought it wasn't realistic. But over time, I've changed my perspective.

Instead of focusing on big statewide numbers, I focus on the micro level — one intersection, one roadway segment. I've seen intersections go from having serious crashes to having zero. If it's possible at one location, then it's possible at a group of locations. And if we keep adding treated locations to that list, we can keep moving the needle.

The Safe System approach reinforces that optimism. It recognizes that humans make mistakes — I've made mistakes myself while driving. The question isn't whether mistakes will happen; it's whether those mistakes have to be fatal. By layering safety strategies — better markings, curve signing, intersection design improvements, roadside treatments — we can reduce the severity of those mistakes. That layered, intentional approach gives me real hope that zero is achievable.

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