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Life not so precious

By Jim Nowlan

Life is precious, but maybe not all that precious. Take the Illinois General Assembly (please), which must decide life and death matters frequently and in doing so indirectly places a value on each life.

In recent weeks, for example, the state legislature has approved an increase in the speed limit on downstate Interstate highways from 65 to 70 miles per hour. About the same time, lawmakers passed legislation that would ban hand-held cell phone use in automobiles. Both bills await action by the governor.

At the national level, the National Transportation Safety Board has recommended reducing the alcohol threshold for drivers from .08 percent to .05 percent blood content. State legislatures will undoubtedly grapple with the issue in upcoming legislative sessions.

It is obvious, to me at least, that each of these issues deals with life and death. We could, for example, reduce the speed limit to 30 mph and reduce carnage on our highways dramatically, from the 40,000 or so that are killed annually across the nation.

Yet that would be intolerable to the motoring public, and the cost in time lost and the slowdown in deliveries of important goods would be high. Economists could determine the costs and benefits in lives saved—and the value per life.

Government agencies and insurance companies have long put dollar value on human life. According to an article in TIME, insurance companies calculate that to make a treatment worth its cost, it must guarantee one year of additional “quality life” for \$50,000 or less.

In 2010, the U.S. EPA set the value of a life at \$9.1 million while the transportation agency came up with a lower figure of about \$6 million.

When I was a back-bench state lawmaker decades ago, I recall a debate over whether the state should pay for then new and wildly expensive kidney dialysis machines and treatments. Clearly, the treatments saved lives, but the state was broke. I can't remember the outcome but the cost-benefit per life was calculable.

In the recent debate over the bill to increase the speed limit in Illinois, the American Automobile Association in Chicago reported a 39 percent increase in fatalities involving big trucks since the speed limit on them was increased in 2010 from 55 to 65 throughout much of the state.

The bill's sponsor, Jim Oberweis (R-Sugar Grove), countered with a report from Purdue University that showed no increase in such fatalities when Indiana raised its limit to 70.

I asked a couple of state lawmakers I respect how they go about doing their "calculus" in determining how to vote on life-and-death bills.

House deputy minority leader David Leitch (R-Peoria) says he relies upon his long life experience in casting votes. "Studies lose some of their impact because there always seem to be other studies with conflicting findings." Oh, the problem of "dueling studies."

State senator Jason Barickman (R-Bloomington), an attorney, uses a three-part test:

Does the proposal share the expectations of the culture of my district? Are we legislating to protect ourselves from our own bad behavior, as in cell phone prohibition? And what are the practical considerations and unintended consequences, e.g. would lowering the alcohol content limit simply overcrowd our prisons further?

An analysis of cold dollars-per-life lost or gained is probably not practicable in most cases.

For example, writing in the Chicago Tribune about the possibility of lowering the blood alcohol content to .05 percent, columnist Steven Chapman wonders how you “value the pleasures of social drinking?” He also notes the chilling effect on tipplers that causes them to limit themselves more tightly than the law allows to avoid being anywhere close to the legal limit.

[And I imagine life in the here and now is always more valuable than life in the abstract, which is what public policy is generally reduced to dealing with. Yet each future life lost or gained becomes the here and now at some point for loved ones.]

Were I a lawmaker today, I would probably have voted to increase the driving speed limit to 70; after all, I drive 70-72 mph on Interstates as it is.

Yet I would worry about the 18-wheelers increasing their speeds beyond what they drive today. Think of your own feelings of heightened danger alongside an 18-wheeler on pitch-black nights in a driving rain on slippery Interstate roads.

Decision-making in a legislative body is often tough. Life and death rides on those decisions. You should ask candidates for the legislature how they go about making decisions, and whether that is close to the approach you would take.

Life may be precious, but it has a price.