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Safety Culture Keeps Highway Drivers Alive

By: Bill Cramer

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From Fort McMurray, Canada to the highways of Greece, the central importance of safety was a big conversation point at IBTTA's 86th Annual Conference and Exhibition in Baltimore last week.

Keynote speaker Darby Allen, now-retired chief of the local fire department that fought the massive [Fort McMurray wildfires](#) in 2016, stressed the safety culture that enabled an oil sands company town located deep in Canada's boreal forest to evacuate 90,000 people without a single death directly attributable to the blaze.

A Safety Mindset

The secret asset that kept thousands of people alive, he said, was the safety training so many townspeople had received on

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the job and brought home as a basic mindset: when the winds shifted, the fire surged, and a harrowing escape through smoke and flames suddenly became the only survival option, the evacuees stayed calm and got it done.

 

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Minutes before Allen took to the main stage, ASECAP President Bill Halkias, who also leads the Hellenic Association of Toll Road Network, traced toll concessionaires' role in meeting an audacious goal earlier in the fall: September 19 had been designated European Day Without a Road Death, and the continent's wider surface transportation community delivered.

"Let's be very careful," Halkias told Baltimore delegates, "so that we don't see blood on the asphalt of our European motorways."

While the industry contributes €12 billion to the EU's GDP, collects €5 billion in value-added tax (VAT), and creates 50,000 jobs, Halkias said those accomplishments are no more important than delivering the level of highway safety customers expect and deserve.

"How important is it to be safe, to go to work in the morning and come home in the afternoon to see our families?" he asked. Between 2001 and 2016, "we reduced fatal accidents on European motorways by 64%."

The Model Makes a Difference

In an interview in Baltimore with Tolling Points, Halkias pointed to the toll concession model as a factor in the EU industry's success in building a pervasive safety culture. The crucial difference: When a concessionaire earns the right to operate tolled infrastructure, it also acquires many of the obligations that belong to the government that issues the charter.

"When the state concedes that right, it asks private and even public entities to sign a contract," he explained. "Unless we fulfill all the obligations in that contract, we can't really say we've lived up to it. One of the obligations is safety, and it's of paramount importance."

So "it's not just that they want us to maintain the roads and fix the potholes. We need to protect our own people when they are out there performing maintenance work, and of course protect the drivers who are passing through," using creative tools like pictograms to communicate across multiple languages and nationalities.

Recognizing that “sometimes, I’m sorry to say, people in their 60s like us have stopped learning and are keeping their bad habits,” Halkias said ASECAP and its member agencies are focusing on youth. “We started working with the younger generations who are tomorrow’s drivers,” he said.

In addition to learning life-saving habits for themselves, “they go home and they’re the best advocates for what they learn in school, telling their parents not to talk on their cell phones while they drive and insisting that they wear seatbelts. The kids are the ones who are making a difference.”

[Read more about Bill Halkias’ and Hellastron’s past work on highway safety.](#)

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International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association
1146 19th St NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20036

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