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BY SCOTT SULLIVAN EDITOR



Risk & Rhetoric

It's a jungle out there. Or a swamp, depending. Case in point, the mother and her two children killed in South Carolina May 7 after crashing into an alligator.

Police said Amber Stanley, 24, her son Jack, 4, and daughter Autumn, 2, were northbound on I-95 around 1 a.m. when her 2011 Kia Soul hit a gator crossing the road. The car veered into the median, hit a tree, caught fire and three people perished. Police didn't say if the gator got to the other side.

We don't lack dangers in Saugatuck-Douglas either but alligators, crocodiles, armadillos that litter Texas roads and so on are not among them.

Every silver lining has a dark cloud. When Steve Williford entered my office last week, I thought, "Isn't it early for Scrooge?" That's the character he has played in local productions of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" for 31 years.

Steve wasn't "Bah hum- bugging" this time but concerned about Blue Star Highway safety. I am too. Blue Star is the essential north-south route through our community, busy, commercial, goes by my office and lends its name to this column. I can't tell you the crashes I've seen on it, twisted metal I've photographed, shattered glass and lives. I wish I could say, "It's so dangerous no one drives on it anymore." People's use of it is exactly what *makes* it dangerous.

Friends of the Blue Star Trail plan to celebrate their newly-built bike-pedestrian stretch west of and separate from the highway this Sunday. It will be near the corner of Old Allegan Road from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. All are welcome.

Douglas is working on another section of the trail as part of its Blue Star rebuilding south of the Kalamazoo River bridge.

Both stretches have been controversial, as is most everything here. One man's (a walker or biker's) investment in health and safety is another's (a driver's) money wasted to create alternate risks.

I get it. I use nonmotorized trails and mostly like them, especially ones set away from traffic. The best follow former rail beds or utility-line easements through the countryside.

Here, we don't have those luxuries. There are Blue Star Trail stretches — near the bridge, between the highway and business parking lots — where my wished-for buffer is not available. How do users cross Lake Street in Saugatuck city safely? Is a tunnel or bridge there feasible?

Steve's concern was for vehicles turning left on the two-lane highway, prompting cars behind them to swing right — sometimes into the bike lane — to pass around them. "It's illegal," he said. "But it happens and causes accidents. What can we do?"

I had no good answer. The power of the press only goes so far. How can we human-proof the world when we can't even human-proof ourselves? I try not to preach here because I would lose respect for readers who would heed anything I say.

Steve got me thinking about Community Risk Reduction. It's a mantra for the Saugatuck Township Fire District Chief Greg Janik, whose department has been proactive — some critics say over-reaching — in its safety-enforcement efforts.

I support such efforts because "reduction" is realistic. Everything we do involves risk: waking up in the morning, showering, driving to work ... I haven't hit a gator but did clip a deer on Blue Star. I got to the other side, Bambi didn't.

You can't *eliminate* risk. What good is a goal if it's not scalable? But taking common-sense steps — education, outreach, best-practice traffic management, fire-prevention measures for modern structures, whose use of synthetics mean they burn faster — *can* reduce it.

"What can I do?" I asked Steve. "As a newspaper editor, tell folks, 'Be careful out there'?" I get criticized for printing crash and fire pictures, but the aim is not to exploit or sensationalize these tragedies. The news is the news. It's important to inform readers and remind them that these things happen. No one thinks accidents will befall us until they do. That's why our first responders are so important."

I don't want to get into the politics of firefighters backing the Saugatuck Township recall effort. Township board members do not want people dying either.

I entrust first responders as safety experts. The public's well-being should be a priority for elected officials too, but they are called on to represent a broad base of their constituents. Some think overzealous safety constraints make building, or doing much of anything, unaffordable.

We can agree to disagree when democracy is functioning. Perceive a misuse of power? Elected officials are subject to recall and fire leaders can be fired by governments that hire them. Checks and balances can be misused too, of course.

What we have here — in addition to a failure to communicate — is a policy disagreement that *could* lead to loss of lives. So *could* Saugatuck city police cuts, anyone not fixing roads on a timely basis or enforcing new codes on buildings that pre-exist them.

Here is what *will* happen: death and taxes. That our own anger will lead to danger.

I favor reducing the risks caused by heated rhetoric. Be careful out there, I say.