

Thanksgiving means turkey and traveling

Jimmy Martin (State Representative)

It is the big Thanksgiving week. Parents adjust their schedules around the kids getting out of school. Turkeys and all the fixings fly off the shelves at the local market. Even the stores start to put up Christmas decorations in preparation for the shopping to follow the feast.

There is one of the biggest Thanksgiving traditions few people like to prepare for: the travel.

Thanksgiving marks the busiest travel week of the year. Airports are crowded, buses are packed, and of course the roadways will be very busy.

The American Automobile Association has just estimated that travel this Thanksgiving will be up by 1.4 percent over last year. It is a pretty standard annual increase, but it is in stark contrast to what happened last year.

As the recession began to hit fully last fall, folks decided to skip the travel to be with family. Travel last Thanksgiving week fell an unprecedented 25 percent as job worries abounded. This year families seem to have a better handle on what will happen in the immediate future, and the emotional tug of family and turkey will get more people traveling.

We need to be careful on the roads. A recent study from the University of Alabama's Center for Advanced Public Safety found that the days before and after holidays have a higher risk for highway crashes involving death and injuries. Yet, the holiday itself is often fairly safe to travel on. UA's study found that Thanksgiving Day 2008 was the 13th lowest day of the year for serious crashes.

As we get on the crowded interstates and state highways during this holiday week, it is important to obey speed limits and other traffic laws. Data shows that following these rules ensures the safety of not only the passengers in your own vehicle but also protects the others who are also on the road.

For those who want to drive recklessly this holiday week, they will probably be seeing an Alabama state trooper in their rearview mirror. The Alabama Department of Public Safety will be out working extra-duty patrols throughout Thanksgiving week to make the roads safer for holiday travelers.

State officials anticipate that traffic will be especially heavy during the travel period beginning late Wednesday and going all the way through Sunday night. Last year, 10 people died in vehicle crashes in Alabama during this holiday period. Troopers said six of the vehicle occupants killed were not wearing safety belts, and alcohol was a factor in at least three of the fatal crashes.

Troopers will be on special lookout for drunk drivers, and they are good at it. From January through October, trooper DUI arrests increased by more than 700 to 5,897, compared with 5,155 arrests during the same period in 2008.

However, what public safety experts say, and what the grim data shows clearly, is that buckling up is the most important thing you can do to ensure safety. It is also the law.

The extra patrols during critical weeks and in specific areas are a strategy that the troopers have been employing throughout the year to try and prevent fatalities. The “blitzes” as they are known, are a way to focus limited state resources to try and lower auto deaths.

It seems to be working. To date, trooper reported traffic deaths in Alabama are down by 90 — from 575 in 2008 to 485 this year.

That is 90 more people who will make it to their loved ones this year. That is surely something to be thankful for.

Jimmy Martin serves as Chilton County’s representative in the Alabama Legislature.