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Highway safety: no lowering of speed limits for several months

by Rafaele Rivas (translated from the French by Frank Owen, Alpha Omega Engineering, www.aoengr.com)

The National Council of Highway Safety (CNSR), meeting in a plenary session Friday, 29 November, debated the lowering of speed limits (from 90 kph (55 mph) to 80 kph (49 mph)) on secondary roads, where two thirds of fatal accidents occur, but has not reached any vote over this sensitive question.

To reduce the number of deaths on these roads, the committee of experts of the CNSR has detailed two options. The first consists of lowering the speed limit by 10 kph on all two-way roads that have no separator in the median. This option would be the most effective, because it would save “350-400 lives per year”, explained Bernard Laumon, the president of the committee. The second option considered would be to lower the speed limit on “the large part of these two-way routes”, based on their accident rate and on their condition. This would permit saving “210-240 lives per year”, but it would be “more acceptable”.

“The debates have been rough”

While the report of experts was delivered to the CNSR at the beginning of October, only the commission “Alcohol, Drugs, Speed” has studied it. “The debates have been rough,” explained its president, Dr. Philippe Lauwick, before the 50 or so members of the plenary. “Our commission has approved the limitation of speed by a majority, not unanimously,” he added. Furthermore, the committee did not say which option it preferred. “I think that we will not finish our work before June 2014,” indicated Mr. Lauwick to journalists. The other commissions, subsidiary to the CNSR, have not begun to examine the report.

The exchanges in the plenary session have shown a lively opposition by the automobile lobby. Daniel Quéro, president of the association of 40 million drivers, has indicated that “the measure has been rejected by 85% of the people.” “Why, with safer and safer cars, must one drive less and less fast?” he asked indignantly. His association has received almost 100,000 signatures. Denis Astagneau, the president of the French Association of the Automotive Press, deplores that “certain people want to pass laws in the area of highway safety considering it an exact science instead of a human science.” He has also protested against the fact that “one always prefers repression over prevention and pedagogy.”

These remarks have been refuted by experts. Bernard Laumon, in his position as “epidemiologist”, has contested the position that highway safety is not a science. “With this type of argument, one cannot say that tobacco is dangerous, that asbestos causes asbestosis, nor how babies are made,” he replies. He has recalled also that there exists “a law of kinetic energy.”

“Opposition characterized between prevention and repression”

Claudine Pérez-Díaz, sociologist at the CNRS and member of the committee of experts, has indicated, to the attention of Mr. Quéro, that the questionnaires must be representative and “not induce responses.”

“While they have been founded on valid methods, they have not obtained 85% of favorable responses,” she indicates. Finally, she explained that “if one wants, one can change the acceptability of an issue,” in asking people in advance, during and after the questionnaire is filled out, if they are know about the beneficial effect of the change. The accident expert Claude Got, another member of the committee of experts, is irritated by “the opposition being caricatured between prevention and repression”. For him the measures of interdiction are acts of prevention, “preventing tens of thousands of deaths.”

Chantal Perrichon, present of the League against Highway Violence, deplores that, in the face of measures “strong and effective” proposed by the experts to reduce the number of deaths, certain people do not deem them to be “acceptable”. “When are we going to vote on this recommendation?” she asks, regretting that a vote didn’t taken place the same day. Frédéric Péchenard, inter-ministerial delegate of Highway Safety, recalled that in November, “more than 100 radars were damaged.” He estimates that “it is not useful to take a vote today, the report posing the question of the cost of the impact.” That certain journalists have made known that the government wants to let the municipal elections pass before making any decision, Armand Jung, Socialist deputy of the Lower Rhine, is angry: “It is me, and me alone, who fixes the date of the plenary sessions.” Nevertheless, it seems that any vote on the question of speed limits should not be expected before June, and no meeting of the Inter-ministerial Committee of Highway Safety is to take place before the big vacations.