Toward Zero Deaths campaign won't distract state motorists

At the Michigan Department of Transportation, the traveling public’s safety is paramount. Safety defines everything we do — from the design, building and maintenance of state roadways to our oversight of rail, transit and non-motorized travel — and our communications with the public.

Safety also underscores our Toward Zero Deaths campaign. While zero transportation deaths might seem a lofty goal in the abstract, it becomes very real when the campaign’s results mean the life of a brother, sister, mother or son is saved.

I am happy the Times Herald shares our concern about safety on the roads as emphasized in the July 29 editorial, “MDOT must revise safety campaign,” about our decision to pilot a once-a-month program on highway message boards that displays the number of lives lost on Michigan public roadways so far this year.

I also understand why the editorial questioned whether the messages themselves are a distraction for drivers.

Reading signs is an accepted — even required — part of being a responsible driver. With attention directed outside the vehicle and in line with the direction of travel, this activity is different from other common distractions superfluous to responsible driving — using a phone, texting, smoking, eating, drinking, grooming or adjusting a radio or climate control.

The dynamic message boards used to display traffic fatality numbers generally convey travel information and provide it in close relation to a driver's expected attention to the roadway.

Consider the second or two it takes to read an intentionally brief message about traffic fatalities vs. the time other distractions last, according to a 2003 study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety:
Cell phone use: Average 12.9 seconds to place a call, 7.9 seconds to answer one; average conversation: 1.5 minutes.

Music/audio: Average adjustments of 7.4 times per hour of driving, averaging 5.5 seconds for each adjustment.

Smoking: Average 4.1 seconds to light a cigarette; average smoking time: 3.4 minutes.

Grooming: Average 11.8 seconds.

Add to that list the distraction of texting. Sending or receiving a text takes a driver’s eyes from the road an average of 4.6 seconds, the time it takes to drive the length of a football field at 55 mph, according to the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute.

The message boards are only the latest means MDOT and other Michigan safety and police agencies use to warn of distracted driving’s dangers. We’re committed to trying everything to achieve our goal.

For these reasons and because of the positive feedback in the nine other states employing this messaging strategy, we decided to pilot the fatality message program. We believe reducing traffic fatalities outweighs the fleeting distraction of reading a brief safety message.

Mostly, we hope this proves to be another effective tool to make travel in Michigan as safe as it can be and move us closer toward zero deaths.

**Kirk T. Steudle is the state transportation director.**