

C O R N E R

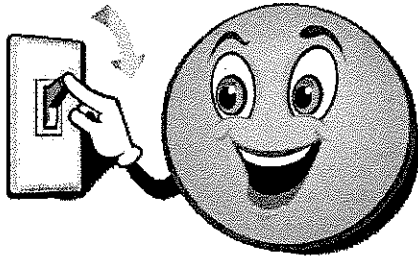
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Is It Lean, Green or Just Plain Hazardous?

By Lenny Hulme

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Everywhere you look, whether it is on television or in newspapers, the message to cut costs and reduce energy use dominates the headlines. States and municipalities are having to make drastic cuts to their budgets. Are some of these cuts at the risk of public safety? I recently pondered this very question when I was approached by a local investigative reporter asking if the City of Mesa would consider turning off roadway lights at night in an effort to reduce costs and energy use.

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The reporter was referencing an August 2009 article in USA Today written by Dennis Cauchon, which stated municipalities across the country have gone to this drastic cost-cutting measure to save money. "The cost-cutting move coincides with changing attitudes about streetlights. Once viewed as helpful safety measures, the lights are increasingly seen by some public officials and researchers as an environmental issue, creating light pollution and excessive energy."

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Before contemplating the cost and environmental impact of roadway lighting, I believe it is important to remember why roadway lighting is such an important part of a highway system. It contributes to a safe environment and facilitates traffic flow for the traveling public during evening or nighttime driving. Lighting shows drivers changes in direction, obstacles, and roadway surface conditions.

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There are many valid reasons where lighting is not only needed, but required. It is important to understand the lighting objectives and how much is enough, in order to balance the need for lighting while minimizing light pollution and increasing energy efficiency. A number of social and economic benefits are attributable to roadway lighting, including but are not limited to:

- Facilitation of traffic flow,
- Reduction of nighttime accidents,
- Aid to police protection,
- Promotion of roadside businesses, and
- Safety for pedestrians and bicyclists.

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Initial practices in assessing lighting needs include:

- Identification of community objectives and whether the street in question needs lighting.
- Identification whether other ways exist to accomplish the goals without installing lighting (including marking, mechanical structures, etc.)¹



Clearly the need for roadway lighting was established to safeguard the public. Are we as public officials prepared to sacrifice safety for savings? Is this the only option we have? Would this be a permanent move or a stop-gap measure until the economy becomes stronger? State and local governments must carefully analyze and prioritize the needs of their citizens. Cost savings and environmental impacts should not be the sole driving force behind these discussions.

¹Footnote: Center for Environmental Excellence by AASHTO (the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials) Copyright 2009.