6. PROJECT 10 FOR 1982

Drunken Driving Presents A Most Critical Problem

In the City of Lafayette in 1981, there were 16 fatalities. Of the 16, 12 were alcohol-or drug-related.

In Louisiana, about 1,100 people are killed in traffic accidents annually, more than half involve drinking. On the national level 52,000 Americans die in traffic accidents and about half of these involve alcohol as a key factor.

It’s a fact that drinking drivers kill more people than are murdered in this country each year. In addition drinking drivers seriously injure thousands more.

If the national average is 50 percent and the Lafayette average in 1981 was 75 percent, it would indicate that if the drinking driver is a serious problem in the U.S., it is near the crisis point in Lafayette.

That may explain the recent public outcry about the drinking driver stimulated by a recent local visit by Candy Lightner, the national founder of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers.

It is apparent that the drinking driver problem has been on the minds of many citizens in this community and boiled to the surface when Lightner challenged citizens and public officials to come to grips with the problem.

Lafayette is a party town. We encourage people to come to Lafayette and have a good time and most of the good times involve drinking. District Attorney Nathan Stansbury points out that in 1979 one-third of the drinking drivers arrested were from out of the parish, one from as far away as Saudi Arabia. He said in a random sampling he did during one period of the same year he determined that 178 out of 277 arrested for OWI were from out of the parish which figures to more than 67 percent.

We do not propose that everyone quit drinking and we have appealed for a common sense approach to the drinking driver problem. If there is one thing we do not need it is a wild-eyed group trying to bring back prohibition. This will not work and it should not be the approach.

We also do not agree with the group that wants to throw every first-time offender in jail. But judges tell us that high fines are not the answer.

What we need is a responsible group of citizens to study the problem and come up with some common-sense answers that can be enforced. We certainly can’t throw everyone in jail as we have no room in jail.

It has been pointed out that in city court every second offender was sentenced to six months in jail until the federal court decrees limited the space in jail. Then second offenders went to the Halfway House but now it is full and there is a waiting list. Second offenders can no longer go to jail.

This is just an example of the complexities of the drinking driver problem and what it will take to solve it. We admit that there are no easy solutions but we also are firmly resolved that no one has a right to get behind the wheel of an automobile while intoxicated and endanger the lives of our citizens.

We believe that the public wants action on this problem and The Advertiser pledges its support to reaching a common-sense response to the situation as quickly as possible.

(Tomorrow: USL).