



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Cutting Roadside Trees

Author(s)

Michael Pritchard

Year

1992

Description

For each of the past 7 years at least one person has suffered a fatal automobile accident by crashing into trees closely aligned along a 3 mile stretch of Forest Drive. Many other accidents have also occurred, causing serious injuries, wrecked cars, and damaged trees. Some of the trees are quite close to the pavement. Two law suits have been filed against the road commission for not maintaining sufficient road safety along this 3 three mile stretch. Both were dismissed because the drivers were going well in excess of the 45 mph speed limit.

Abstract

This case is one of thirty-two cases which address a wide range of ethical issues that can arise in engineering practice provided by the Center For the Study of Ethics in Society, Western Michigan University.

Body

Kevin Clearing is the engineering manager for the Verdant County Road Commission (VCRC). VCRC has primary responsibility for maintaining the safety of county roads. Verdant County's population has increased by 30% in the past 10 years. This has

resulted in increased traffic flow on many secondary roads in the area. Forest Drive, still a two lane road, has more than doubled its traffic flow during this period. It is now one of the main arteries leading into Verdant City, an industrial and commercial center of more than 60,000 people.

For each of the past 7 years at least one person has suffered a fatal automobile accident by crashing into trees closely aligned along a 3 mile stretch of Forest Drive. Many other accidents have also occurred, causing serious injuries, wrecked cars, and damaged trees. Some of the trees are quite close to the pavement. Two law suits have been filed against the road commission for not maintaining sufficient road safety along this 3 three mile stretch. Both were dismissed because the drivers were going well in excess of the 45 mph speed limit.

Other members of VCRC have been pressing Kevin Clearing to come up with a solution to the traffic problem on Forest Drive. They are concerned about safety, as well as law suits that may some day go against VCRC. Clearing now has a plan -- widen the road. Unfortunately, this will require cutting down about 30 healthy, longstanding trees along the road.

Clearing's plan is accepted by VCRC and announced to the public. Immediately a citizen environmental group forms and registers a protest. Tom Richards, spokesperson for the group, complains, "These accidents are the fault of careless drivers. Cutting down trees to protect drivers from their own carelessness symbolizes the destruction of our natural environment for the sake of human 'progress.' It's time to turn things around. Sue the drivers if they don't drive sensibly. Let's preserve the natural beauty and ecological integrity around us while we can."

Many letters on both sides of the issue appear in the Verdant Press, the issue is heatedly discussed on local TV, and Tom Richards presents VCRC with a petition to save the trees signed by 150 local citizens.

Discuss how Kevin Clearing should proceed at this point.

Notes

Originally titled: "Trees."

Case study originally published in *Teaching Engineering Ethics: A Case Study Approach*, by Michael Pritchard. Center for the Study of Ethics in Society, Western

Michigan University, 1992.

Contributor(s)

Michael Pritchard

Editor(s)

Michael Pritchard

Rights

Use of Materials on the OEC

Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario

Parent Collection

Cases for Teaching Engineering Ethics

Topics

Community Relations

Environmental Justice

Public Well-being

Risk

Safety

Social Responsibility

Sustainability

Workplace Ethics

Discipline(s)

Engineering

Civil Engineering

Publisher

Online Ethics Center

Authoring Institution

Center for the Study of Ethics in Society at Western Michigan University