



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada
Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

...from the
director's chair

Ontario's senior drivers still deserve better

Since OBAC is on "the list," the month of December brings a plethora of greeting cards from politicians wishing me health, happiness, and a prosperous new year. It's one of those things they do to make sure voters and stakeholders know they care. Right.

In addition to his Christmas card, I received an interesting letter from Ontario's Minister of Transportation, Bob Chiarelli, regarding senior commercial licence renewal in this province.

Minister Chiarelli agreed that the process "can be made less onerous for senior drivers without compromising safety" and is prepared to re-open discussions on the subject.

For folks outside Ontario who might not follow this issue as closely as we aging Ontario drivers, regulation 340/94, as it's affectionately known, is one of the most blatant examples of age discrimination you're ever likely to see in driver licensing.

The Highway Traffic Act, which sets out the types of examinations to determine a person's fitness to drive, requires Class A commercial drivers aged 65 and older to complete an annual driving test with a tractor-trailer unit, in addition to the written test and a full medical examination.

Age, set arbitrarily at 65, is the only thing that triggers the road test, and Ontario is the sole jurisdiction in North America (and perhaps the world) with this requirement. Let me be clear – the medical isn't a huge deal; after all, most of us at that age see our doctors on a regular basis anyway, and even the written test (flawed though it be) is something we can live with. But it's the road test that's the kicker.

Not only is the road test the most costly and inconvenient element of re-testing, there is absolutely nothing in the test that would reveal shortcomings related to age, such as eroding cognitive skills, reaction time, decision-making capability, or physical dexterity. Such a test, in fact, like the fountain of youth, doesn't exist.

So who do they think they're kidding? To believe they're weeding out old "unsafe" drivers by administering the current entry level, mark and measure, circle check, drive-around-the-block test is just plain silly. Until there is a road test developed that can measure the failing abilities associated with aging, the ministry needs to put a stop to this utterly useless and often humiliating practice of harassing some of Ontario's most

conscientious and safest drivers.

As a result of concerted lobbying by trucking associations, carriers, and more than a few old geezers, the Ministry undertook a comprehensive policy review in 2008 of renewal requirements for senior commercial drivers, and I think the light came on for a few bureaucrats over there. Also, mandatory retirement at age 65 (for everyone) had recently been made illegal in Ontario, and there may have been a nagging feeling that truckers' claims of discrimination weren't that far off the mark.

In any case, they recommended changes that would end the practice of age-based testing, but for some perplexing reason, a succession of Ministers has refused to act.

Obviously, I'm pleased that Minister Chiarelli is prepared to talk, but I gotta tell ya, he'll have to come up with something a lot more meaningful than the "initiatives" he outlined in his letter to get this old girl excited.

To consider it worthy of mention that senior drivers pay a reduced road test fee (\$14 vs. \$75) only tells me that he's just not listening. Time and again we've explained that Class A renewal can cost a driver upwards of \$1,000 in truck procurement fees and lost earnings for the road test, so a savings of 60 bucks just isn't going to do it.

As for being able to use a truck with an automatic transmission for the road test, that simply fixes a blunder made back in 2008 when they introduced the "restricted" Class A licence. The restriction was put in place to close the loophole that allowed one to get a Class A licence with a pick-up truck hauling a horse trailer, and it's a good example of how we seniors tend to be invisible a lot of the time when rules are being made.

In defining the spec's and configuration of a vehicle that could be used for the test, "manual transmission" was included as a requirement (not unreasonable for a first-time test candidate), but someone completely overlooked the fact that there could be a whole whack of old pros, who've been steering and gearing trucks for upwards of 40 years, showing up to take the test with their driver-friendly, state-of-the-art automated transmissions.

And I fail to see how drawing pictures of air brake



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adjustments and safety checks – the practical air brake test – is measuring the deficiencies related to aging. That's what the medical exam by a qualified physician is all about. And anyway, a written air brake test is part of the renewal process that all drivers go through on a regular basis to maintain their Class A licence and air brake endorsement.

But while I'm a bit crotchety about the whole thing, I'll give Minister Chiarelli the benefit of the doubt. His letter indicates a willingness to work toward an appropriate long-term solution, and he has tasked his Parliamentary Assistant, Vic Dhillon (MPP, Brampton West), to lead a review. We'll be at the table, once again, gladly sharing our extensive body of research that points to much more effective and less onerous ways of determining fitness to drive – at any age.

Our message is clear. We have no problem supporting testing of class A licence holders on an as-required basis – regardless of age – as long as the trigger is linked to factors such as a driver's safety record, the demerit point system, or medical-based criteria that suggests testing is warranted.

The number 65 as an arbitrary line between safe and not safe has got to go, and the sooner Minister Chiarelli and the other folks at Queen's Park recognize this, the sooner we can get to work on initiatives that will make our highways – the workplace of commercial drivers – safer.

And before I leave my soapbox, let me remind everyone out there that as the industrialized world ages, having more older Canadians in the workforce is key to this country's future prosperity.

We're so focused on developing strategies to get younger workers into the industry that we overlook the golden resource of seasoned veterans. Makes me mad.

For more information on OBAC's policy regarding age-based driver testing, as well as other "grey matters," check out the 'Age Page' on our Web site at www.obac.ca.