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Ticketing Text Messengers

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It's not unusual these days to see drivers almost miss traffic lights or barely avert crashes - all because they are sending or reading text messages instead of concentrating on the road.

If state Rep. Doug Holder, R-Sarasota, gets his way, it may soon be illegal for Florida drivers to text message while behind the wheel.

The bill, which the Legislature will take up when its regular session begins next month, would prohibit the operation of a moving vehicle while reading, manually writing or typing, or sending messages on electronic wireless communication devices.

Text messaging isn't the only distraction that drivers face, of course. Some people mix driving with eating, drinking, listening to the radio, talking to passengers, reading, looking for a lost item on the floor - the list can go on and on. There are existing laws against careless driving.

But the National Safety Council, citing recent academic studies, says on its Web site that "using a wireless communications device while driving is one of the most significant distractions that affects driving performance."

"The relative risk, frequency and duration of cell phone use and text messaging make these activities much more likely to lead to a crash or near-crash than most other activities people do in vehicles," says the council.

Last month, it called on motorists to stop using cell phones and messaging devices while driving, urged businesses to enact policies prohibiting such usage, and implored all states to pass laws against drivers using cell phones.

Late last year, the American Medical Association called text messaging while driving "a public health risk" and cited a study that found that text messaging while driving causes a 400 percent increase in time spent with eyes off the road. The association supports laws that ban text messaging while driving.

Holder is focusing solely on making text messaging illegal, not whether talking on a cell phone - either handheld or wireless - should be allowed while driving. Other lawmakers, in Florida and elsewhere, are addressing cell phone usage.

The safety council, citing a Harvard study, says cell phone use in general contributes to an estimated 6 percent of all crashes nationwide, which equates to 636,000 crashes, 330,000 injuries, 12,000 serious injuries and 2,600 deaths each year.

Holder first introduced the bill during the 2008 legislative session, "but it was not heard in committee, so I wanted to reintroduce it again this year," he said.

He anticipates an easier time lobbying the bill the second time around, confident it will be heard during the committee phase and ultimately gain the approval of fellow lawmakers.

"Text messaging is a great form of communication - just not while driving," he said.

Holder's passion for the bill developed after a conversation with his wife who was moved by the death of a group of teens in a car crash in New York where it was determined the driver had sent a text message shortly before the accident.

He said that while there are many distractions facing drivers, "this is becoming more and more of a problem every day. It's time we act on this growing problem now rather than later."

Seven states prohibit text messaging while driving and nine other states ban the practice specifically for teen drivers.

Drivers like University of Florida student Maeghan Cook, 20, said they think the bill is a good idea. She has friends and family members who have had car accidents while texting and driving.

"I text when I'm driving, too, but I only do it at stoplights, and I don't drive that much either," she said.

Jasmine Reed, 19, who also is a UF student, said she's gotten good at texting while driving but does not recommend it for everyone.

"I think it should be legal, it's at your own risk," Reed said.

Nate McCray, 34, of Gainesville, describes himself as a chronic texter and is not in favor of making the practice illegal. While he understands the logic of such a ban, McCray said he knows what he's doing behind the wheel while texting.

On the fence about the bill is Elizabeth Rodgers, 36, of Gainesville, who tries to control the amount of texting she does while on the road. Rodgers said she depends on text messaging to communicate with her office and personally.

Text messaging is a matter of convenience for Tim Casey, 31, of Gainesville, who said he would not have a problem with a bill banning the practice while driving. He depends on text messaging to communicate with his boss, who is deaf.

"But I don't text while driving. I've been in the car with those who do, and it scares me," he said.

Friends and UF classmates Anjalee Khemlani, 22, and Sangeetha Subramanian, 21, said they believe the bill would be a good thing. Both said they have seen too many people in accidents caused by drivers texting.

"I'm not going to lie. I've done it myself, but it's dangerous," Khemlani said. "It's not for everyone. I'd be in favor of the bill even if it takes away my own freedom."

CTIA-The Wireless Association, a trade group that represents the wireless industry, agrees that no one should text message while driving and would not oppose any law making such activity illegal, association spokesman Joe Farren said.

The association notes that anyone who texts while driving probably is already breaking the law by driving in a careless or reckless manner.

Sprint Nextel Corp. is not opposed to this bill and has no plans to lobby in Tallahassee. John Taylor, public affairs manager for the company, said the larger problem is driver education. He said the legislation is attempting to change driver behavior.

Although not specifically addressing the bill, Chuck Hamby, spokesman for Verizon, said the company has a history of supporting hands-free driving initiatives. "We support keeping people from text messaging while driving ... it is clearly not safe," Hamby said.

Mark Jamison, director of the Public Utility Research Center at UF, said he hopes the bill will be flexible enough to allow the technology to evolve, such as verbal reading of text messages like his phone, but said the language sounds reasonable.

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