

[The National Safety Commission](#)

New Florida Bill Aims to Ban Texting While Driving

Senator Moved to Sponsor Bill After Teens Die In Text-Related Crash

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These days, it's not uncommon to see drivers barely stop for traffic lights or only just avert crashes. Instead of concentrating on driving, they are sending or reading text messages.

It may soon be illegal for Florida drivers to text message while behind the wheel, if state Representative Doug Holder (R-Sarasota) has anything to say about it.

A new bill that would prohibit reading, manually writing or typing, or sending messages on electronic wireless communication devices while operating a moving vehicle will be reviewed by the Legislature next month.

But text messaging isn't the only distraction that drivers face. Some people drive while eating, drinking, tuning the radio, talking to passengers, reading, searching for a dropped item on the floor, and more.

On its Web site, the National Safety Council, crediting recent academic studies, says 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," the council wrote.

It recently called on drivers to stop using cell phones and messaging devices, implored businesses to execute policies prohibiting such usage, and urged all 50 states to pass legislation prohibiting the use of cell phones while driving.

Citing a study that found that text messaging while driving causes a 400 percent increase in time spent not concentrating on the road, the American Medical Association recently labeled text messaging while driving "a public health risk." The association backs laws that ban text messaging while driving.

Representative Holder is concentrating only on making text messaging illegal. His bill is not concerned with whether talking on a cell phone - either handheld or wireless - should be allowed while driving.

Citing a Harvard study, the safety council says cell phone use in general is a part of an approximated 6 percent of all crashes across the nation, which works out to 636,000 crashes, 330,000 injuries, 12,000 serious injuries and 2,600 deaths each year.

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

Anticipating an easier time lobbying for the bill the second time around, Holder is certain it will be debated during the committee phase and ultimately approved by fellow lawmakers.

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

Holder developed the bill after being moved by a conversation with his wife, who herself was touched by the death of a group of teens in a car crash in New York, in which the driver had sent a text message shortly before the fatal crash.

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

Text messaging while driving is prohibited by seven states, and nine others specifically ban the practice for teen drivers.

Maeghan Cook, 20, a University of Florida student, thinks the bill is a good idea. She said she has friends and family members who 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.

Another UF student, Jasmine Reed, 19, said she's learned how to excel at texting while driving, but does not advise 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.

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."

Joe Farren, a spokesman for CTIA-The Wireless Association, which is a trade group that represents the wireless industry, says the Association agrees that text messaging while driving is a deadly mistake, and they would not oppose any law making such activity illegal.

According to the Association, anyone texting while driving is already breaking the law by driving in a careless or reckless manner.

Sprint Nextel Corp. is not opposed to this bill and is not planning on lobbying in Tallahassee. The larger

problem is driver education, said the public affairs manager for the company, John Taylor. He added that the legislation is seeking to change driver behavior.

Verizon did not specifically address the bill, but spokesman Chuck Hamby said the company has a history of supporting hands-free driving legislation. "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 the bill's language sounds reasonable. He hopes the bill will be adaptable enough to allow new technology to evolve, such as verbal reading of text messages by a cell phone or other related device.

Is your teen a safe driver? The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration has developed a new Teen Injury Prevention course to emphasize driving safety for teenagers. For more information, including a Driver Education a Driver Education Book for Parents, visit www.safedriver.com.