

For Immediate Release

Capitol Comment

Distracted Drivers and Other Dangers

By State Rep. Mike May

Money is the thousand-pound gorilla in this session of the legislature, and we will be working overtime to cut about a billion dollars from Iowa's six-billion dollar budget. It could be tough enough to prevent final adjournment on time -- at the end of our scheduled 80 days.

But there are other issues we're dealing with, largely because you and your neighbors have told us you have other concerns as well.

One of the things that seems to be of concern to voters in general is fallout from the helter-skelter advances in electronic technology. Judging from your calls to me, there's significant and legitimate concern about drivers who distract themselves from the road with their high-tech tools and toys. Texting and telephoning are the most-mentioned culprits.

Several bills that have been filed to restrict what you can do behind the wheel.

The most general proposal would make it a simple misdemeanor to "... intentionally engage in an activity that distracts the person from the safe operation of the motor vehicle." Obviously, this goes beyond electronic devices and could be interpreted as outlawing reading a map, eating, sipping a Coke, and many other activities folks engage in while driving.

I would like your feedback on this issue. Should there be a restrictive bill at all? If so, should it be as comprehensive as the bill I just noted, or should it be narrower, probably covering just electronic devices?

Teen Drivers

There is a certain amount of interest in imposing some new restrictions on teen-age drivers.

Traffic officials say teen-agers in their first six months of licensed driving are by far the most dangerous drivers on the road. The reason is simple, they lack experience. They improve as they go along, but they do so at the peril of themselves, their passengers, and other motorists.

By age 18 there is a dramatic decrease in the number of accidents incurred by teenagers, and some statistics suggest that it might be effective to impose additional restrictions on younger drivers.

For instance, we might limit the number of passengers a teen driver can transport without an adult in the car. The more teenager passengers in a car the more likely the beginning driver will be dangerously distracted.

Statistics also suggest the later in the evening the more dramatic the increase in accidents. (Dad said, "Nothing good happens after midnight.")

With teenagers it might be closer to 11:00 pm. Additionally, the use of cell phones for talking or texting

is obviously a dangerous distraction and possibly needs serious restriction.

Parents seem supportive of additional restrictions through the age of 17, and surveys tend to support that notion. I can understand that. It is easier as a parent to enforce restrictions that are law as opposed to ones parents alone impose.

My final thought is simply a statistic for you to consider. Fully 48 per cent of teenagers who die are killed in automobile accidents. Of those, 38 per cent were drivers, 31 per cent were passengers, and 25 per cent were occupants of other vehicles. These are nothing less than astonishing numbers.

People on the north end of District 6 will be interested to note that Chad Thomas, a 1997 Spirit Lake High School graduate, was in our last transportation committee meeting to advocate certain new teen driving restrictions. He works for a Cedar Rapids organization that promotes healthy choices by teenagers.

Chad, a paraplegic, was injured in an accident the year he graduated from high school. I appreciated hearing from a remarkable young man who turned personal misfortune into a tool to advocate good choices for teenagers.

Labor Bills

We are hearing rumblings that the majority party might try to force passage of one or more of the four labor bills that have been floating around -- but failing to pass -- the past three years.

The rumors center on the so-called and mis-named "Fair Share" scheme to require every worker to pay financial tribute to the big unions. This would gut Iowa's status as a right-to-work state, worsening an already dismal economic outlook.

We're also hearing that Democrats may attempt to repay their political debt to the public employee union bosses by trying again to attack our Chapter 20 -- collective bargaining -- code. You'll recall this is the proposal, which would give unions a chokehold on our schools and communities. A radical version was vetoed by the governor three years ago.

I'll be watching these union-bills carefully and will keep you up to date.
As usual I appreciate any feedback you may have on these or other issues.