

Buckle up!

Seat belt bill gives cops more leeway

By Wayne Peel
staff writer

Michigan's seat belt law would be toughened by a bill pending in the state House.

The bill would allow police to directly stop and ticket drivers and passengers for not wearing a seat belt — a major break from current practice.

But while police, auto companies and insurance agencies say the bill would save lives, others say it's too restrictive.

Seat belt scofflaws already face fines but police don't check for seat belt use without first stopping them for other violations.

"Right now, it's a secondary action," said a spokeswoman for state Rep. Thomas Ilickner, D-Bay City, the bill's chief sponsor.

Even if no more drivers were stopped, seat belt boosters believe the mere threat of tickets would force more folks to buckle up.

"THERE (ARE) people who won't use seat belts under any circumstance, but we see this boosting use to 70 percent," said Kurt Weiss of the Michigan Coalition for Safety Belt Use. The non-profit coalition is sponsored by the Big 3 automakers.

AAA of Michigan also backs the bill.

What do you think?

Should police be allowed to more directly enforce Michigan's seat belt law?

If you favor stronger enforcement, call 953-2031 to vote yes.

If you like the law the way it is, call 953-2036 to vote no.

We'll be waiting to hear from you.

"We're big seat belt backers anyway," said Jerry Branch, manager of community programs for the Dearborn-based insurer. "It's hard to put your finger on exact figures but the feeling is this will save lives and saving lives will save money."

State records for 1990 show that more than 800 of the state's 1,185 auto fatalities weren't wearing seat belts.

At present, an estimated \$1 percent of state residents buckle up. That figure contrasts with the 18 percent who routinely used seat belts before the 1985 state law.

Of the 49 percent who don't buckle up, only a handful get tickets under the current law.

"It's not too common," said David

Piche, Bloomfield Hills public safety director. "Of the roughly 3,000 tickets we give out each year, only a couple hundred are for seat belts."

At present, no suburban Detroit

legislator has signed on as a co-sponsor.

Barbara Dobb, R-West Bloomfield, said she's already heard from constituents outraged by the bill.

"ON ONE hand, there's the feeling this will save lives," Dobb said. "But on the other there (are) people who don't want any more regulations. They want government to get out of their lives."

County police chiefs have endorsed the bill.

"All I know is I've never had to unbuckle a dead person from an auto wreck," Piche said.

Dobb, however, isn't sure how she would vote.

"I haven't made up my mind, but I do think people should wear their seat belts," she said. "I know I use mine."

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(OISA)

Seat belt penalties vary

If you aren't wearing a seat belt, don't get pulled over in Birmingham or the Bloomfields.

Though state law specifies a \$25 fine for non-use — and a \$10 fine if children under 4 aren't using safety seats — local district courts can add their own fees.

Thus, fines in 4th District Court, Bloomfield Township, add up to \$100 for seat belt scofflaws and another \$100 for those who don't provide child restraint seats. Drivers can escape the second fine, however, if they show police they have bought an approved child seat.

Fines in other area courts:

• 46th District Court, Southfield — \$40 seat belts; \$65 child restraint seats.

• 47th District Court, Farmington Hills — \$35 seat belts; \$60 child restraint seats.

• 52nd District Court, Rochester Hills — \$40 seat belt for drivers, \$35 for passengers; \$40 child restraint seats.

• 52nd District Court, Troy — \$55 seat belts; \$55 child restraint seats.

District courts finance their operations through ticket fees.

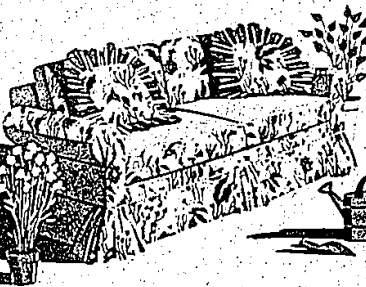
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