

EPD set to begin enforcing 1997 Oregon traffic laws

■ EPD will soon be towing and impounding vehicles of people violating certain driving laws

By Marty Toohey
Oregon Daily Emerald

Starting Thursday, someone caught driving drunk may need a cab for more than just the ride home.

They may also need one for the ride to the impoundment lot.

The Eugene Police Department announced it will begin enforcing two Oregon traffic laws enacted in 1997, which allow officers to tow the vehicles of people detained for driving while intoxicated, driving with a suspended or revoked license, violating license restrictions or driving uninsured.

EPD is now enforcing the laws because a redistribution of administrative duties allows them to handle the extra paperwork, according to

EPD Sgt. Tom Mason, who supervises the traffic enforcement unit.

The new enforcement will mainly target unlicensed and uninsured drivers, Mason said.

"Our experience is that there is a certain group of drivers ... that choose to continue driving uninsured," he said.

Many continue to drive uninsured because overcrowded jails mean courts cannot sentence offenders to jail time, Mason said.

"The court can say, 'Well, you didn't pay your fines, so your license is suspended,' but there's really not a whole lot they can do except make the fines bigger and make the suspension longer when the license is already suspended," Mason said. "And people who've been hit by an uninsured driver realize that once they hit you, you're out of luck."

Officers gave out 7,947 towable citations last year, according to an

EPD study.

Beaverton, Portland, Springfield and the Lane County Sheriff's Office already enforce the towing laws.

The sheriff's office began enforcing the laws two years ago, and Lt. Steven Weir said the results have been "significant."

"Uninsured drivers have traditionally been a big issue here," Weir said about Lane County. "It was not unusual for us to pull over the same people over and over, and now we don't see those people on the road."

Mason said EPD incorporated the towing policy as part of a larger traffic law enforcement effort. The department received a \$15,000 grant to enforce seatbelt laws and a \$10,000 grant to enforce drunk driving laws, both from the Oregon Department of Transportation. Mason said EPD will use the money to fund additional patrols.

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Fines

continued from page 1

Shon O'Donnell, owner of O'Donnell's Irish Pub, echoed Fairbairn's sentiments. He said his informal study found that about 75 percent of his customers smoke, and that since the smoking ban took effect, his business had dropped by about 20 percent.

"How can you ask your customers to go outside and smoke?" O'Donnell said. "If you don't want to smoke,

don't come to my bar."

O'Donnell added that he thinks forcing small businesses to build costly smoking areas is unfair. Right now his customers are using a tent in front of his bar.

O'Donnell said the smoking ban is another example of the Eugene City Council "running local businesses out of town."

"How can seven people have so much impact on my business?" he said.

Fairbairn plans to appeal the fine. O'Donnell is also considering appealing, but does not like the \$150 appeal fee.

Citizens register complaints by calling Lane County Public Health's smoking hotline. The city of Eugene investigates the complaints, and if it confirms smoking in the establishment, it issues a warning.

E-mail community reporter Marty Toohey at martytoohey@dailymerald.com.

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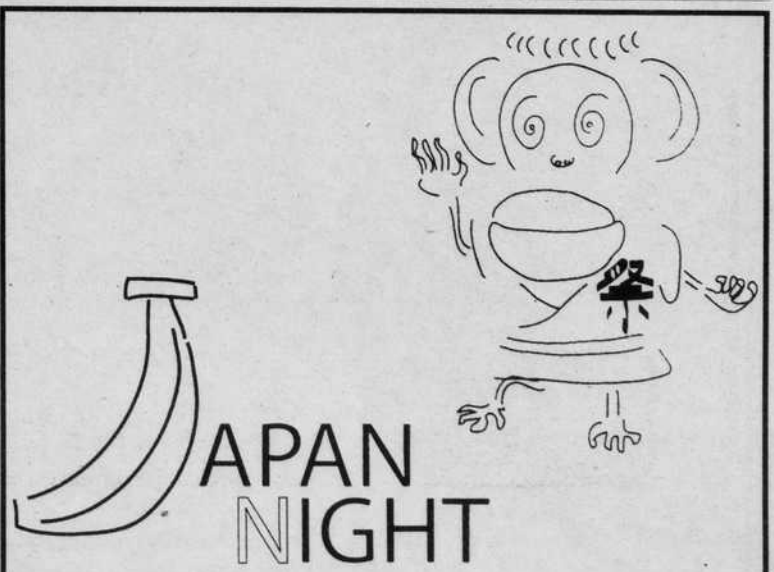
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