

Getting Serious About Distracted Driving

Lawmakers consider big fines

BY CARI HACHMANN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Fines for distracted driving—texting or using a handheld cell phone—could cost as much as \$1,000 if a bill in Salem passes.

Under Senate Bill 9, sponsored by Sen. Peter Courtney (D-Salem), violations for using texting and mobile devices while driving would move from class D status to class B, clearing the way for fines to increase from the current limit of \$250.

“If it was my way, we would treat distracted driving the same way we treat drinking and driving in the state,” Courtney said.

Another bill, filed in the House by Rep. Carolyn Tomei, goes further with plans to increase the offense to class A status with fines up to \$2,000.

The bills are indication that Oregon is getting serious about distracted driving. The state has already outlawed cell phone use by all



Fines could soar to \$1,000 for distracted driving under a proposed Oregon law.

leased on behalf of “Distracted Driving Awareness” month.

“Distracted driving is a behavior that’s dangerous to drivers, passengers and even people walking or biking,” said Troy E. Costales, ODOT’s safety division administrator.

From 2009 to 2011, 41 people died in Oregon from distracted driving crashes and in 2011 alone, there were more than 200 crashes involving drivers on a cell phone.

“When drivers divert their attention from the task of driving to focus on some other activity, they’ve increased their chances of getting in a crash,” said Costales.

The same is true for bicyclists and pedestrians who are distracted, said Costales, who noted that five bicyclists and pedestrians were also killed in crashes while they were distracted.

Dangerous situations arise when bicyclists and pedestrians may be listening to earphones or sending a text message and not watching or listening for oncoming cars, trains or other traffic on busy streets or crosswalks.

drivers, including drivers who use cell phones for calls related to their job. Cell phones with hands free attachments, like Bluetooths or Jabras, are only allowed for those over 18-years-old and text messaging is banned by all drivers with penalties upwards of \$142.

Last year, Oregon State Police stopped more than 4,000 drivers for using a cell phone. Hiding the phone isn’t fooling anyone, officers warned, and holding it on speaker is also illegal.

Distracted while you’re driving can be catastrophic, said the Oregon Department of Transportation in a recent press statement highlighting the importance of travelers staying alert behind the wheel, re-



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