

DRIVERS: ‘Driving is serious business and people need to give it their full focus’

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“People just drive the road and sometimes they’re thinking about work or something else and not as attentive as they should be to the road,” Turner said. “Driving is serious business and people need to give it their full focus.”

Tom Strandberg, spokesman for ODOT’s Region 5, said people don’t realize how many hundreds of yards they can travel on the interstate while looking down for just a few seconds. They think they’re in control, while in reality they’re often drifting into the other lane, going the wrong speed or approaching the back of a slower vehicle too quickly.

“People need to remember their primary job is to stay focused on the road,” he said.

As ODOT puts millions of dollars into making Interstate 84 safer, here are some tips from state agencies on how to increase your chances of making it to your

destination safely:

- Turn your phone off, place it out of reach or give it to a passenger. If the thought of going hours out of contact makes you anxious, try one of the many apps or phone settings designed to combat distracted driving. The Department of Motor Vehicles lists some of their favorites at www.dmv.org/distracted-driving-apps.php. AT&T DriveMode, for example, automatically blocks notifications for texts and calls when you’re moving at more than 15 miles per hour and responds with a message that you are driving and will respond when you get to your destination. It can also notify parents if their teen turns the app off on their phone.
- Try to avoid eating in the car. If you do need nourishment while driving, make sure it’s something easy to eat without looking, such as a granola bar, instead of a messy sandwich or something that needs dipping into

a small container. Smoking is a distraction too.

- Prepare what you can ahead of time. If you’re using a GPS, set it before you take the vehicle out of park. If you like to listen to music on your phone, create a roadtrip playlist ahead of time that will help you resist the temptation to skip through songs. If you’re bringing along a bottled water, loosen the cap before you go. If you can’t quite remember which turn you’re supposed to take, look it up ahead of time.
- Don’t drive drowsy. The sleeper you are, the easier it is for your mind to wander. Get a good night’s sleep the night before your trip, build a few breaks into your schedule and do something like chewing gum to help you stay alert while keeping your eyes on the road. Sometimes people use driving as a way to try and calm themselves down after a big fight or devastating news, but driving while you’re emotionally

distraught can create the same distracted state of mind. Try taking a walk instead, or, if you need to get somewhere, see if you can get a friend to take you.

- Clean your vehicle. A loose item rolling around in the car can be a distraction, as can a poorly placed object blocking your rear view or a dirty window or mirror.
- It should go without saying, but don’t drive impaired. If you think there is even the slightest chance that alcohol, marijuana, medications or some combination of the three might hinder your alertness or response times, make different arrangements to get home.
- If you’re a passenger, encourage the driver to follow these suggestions and help out with things that might tempt them to take their hands off the wheel or eyes off the road.

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Staff photo by E.J. Harris

A model home stands on property that is part of the Virginia’s Place development in Umatilla in October 2017.

COUNCIL: All 24 of the original lots sold

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hadn’t had any takers, while new housing in the city was being snatched up immediately.

In a compromise, the council ended up allowing for 24 residential lots but left the lots directly bordering Willamette Avenue in the commercial zone. But on Tuesday, in light of a request from the Pasco-based developer to revisit the decision, the council agreed in a 4-2 vote to allow those lots to also be zoned for residential use, allowing Fastrack to add eight more homes to the subdivision.

Jared Faris of Fastrack said all 24 of the original lots have already been sold, with housing built or ground broken on 18 and permits applications ready for more.

“We would love to keep extending that neighborhood,” Faris said. “I’m sure we could

get another eight taxpaying families in Umatilla this year.”

City staff and the planning commission both recommended that the council approve the re-zone.

While most of the council agreed, councilor Mel Ray pointed to new industrial growth in the Port of Umatilla area, saying if workers couldn’t find what they wanted in McNary they would likely go to Hermiston instead of downtown Umatilla next.

“We’re going to need commercial support for the industrial park,” he said. “If we allow the traffic to get to the stoplight they’re going to turn left.”

Other councilors, however, said while Ray made some good points about the benefits of more commercial development in McNary, there was at least five more acres of undeveloped commercial land there and the land along Willamette Avenue had been

for sale since the 1970s.

“I can almost guarantee you that 20 years ago somebody sitting in council chambers made that exact same argument,” Michael Roxbury said.

In the end Ray and Roak Ten Eyck voted against the re-zone while the other four councilors voted to allow for eight new houses along Willamette Avenue.

Other business during a three-hour-long city council meeting on Tuesday included an executive session, a presentation by councilor Mark Ribich about work the Tri-Cities were doing to try to get the Army Corps of Engineers to “re-convey” riverfront property back to the city, and a vote to renew franchise agreements with several telecommunications providers.

The council also held a second land-use public hearing before approving a street

vacation. The city agreed to vacate a small, dead-end piece of G Street south of Eighth Street and an alley, with the condition that easements be maintained for utility workers and emergency vehicles.

While the required two-thirds of surrounding landowners gave consent, one neighbor testified against the vacation, citing concerns that it would hinder firefighting efforts if a fire broke out in the grassy land to the south. Umatilla Fire Chief Steven Potts had submitted a letter stating he was OK with the vacation as long as the easements were maintained.

The vacation, requested by Kelly Nobles on behalf of his father, will allow for more parking for a new set of duplexes and a triplex being built there.

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TIP LINE: ‘It’s helping make school a positive place’

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everything,” said Stacie Roberts, principal at Armand Larive Middle School in Hermiston. “With students (giving) information, they’re also a voice for students who may not have one.”

Hermiston School District, along with the Inter-Mountain Education Service District, were two of the pilot programs for SafeOregon in late 2016 and early 2017, said Jodi Sherwood, the tip line coordinator for the Oregon State Police.

Roberts said before the tip line, students could report things to their teachers or administrators, but the anonymous nature of SafeOregon makes it more likely that they will ask for help.

“That took a lot for students,” Roberts said of the old system. “I think we missed a lot, because of the ‘What if they see me walking into the office, or talking to the teacher,’” Roberts said. “It’s unreal to know what kids

could have been reporting all these years to make school a safe place.”

When a student reports an incident, tip line technicians will evaluate and classify them by urgency. “Standard tips” are those that don’t present any immediate risk of bodily harm, and make up about 85 percent of calls, Sherwood said. For those calls, school administrators will be notified by email. With urgent tips, such as a report of a fight that’s supposed to happen at school, administrators will be called within 10 minutes. If necessary, SafeOregon will notify the local dispatch service too, so they can contact police.

Sherwood said about 950 of Oregon’s 1,250 schools are signed up for SafeOregon.

Roberts said Armand Larive will typically get anywhere from two to 10 tips a week, ranging in severity. Regardless of the nature, the school follows up on every incident, even if a child reports being pushed in the hall. They will ask the student

named in the report about the behaviors, and try to find out what’s going on.

“We’ve got to change those negative and unsafe behaviors,” she said.

She added that while it does happen, it’s uncommon for kids to use the reporting system as a joke, or make false reports.

Some of the tips are more urgent, Roberts said. They have caught children posting photos of themselves cutting their arms, or other suicidal tendencies, and have been able to intervene.

Edmiston said so far, he feels the service has worked.

“The traditional model of policing — something bad happens, and police respond — is almost nonexistent. We’re forced to be as proactive as possible, and this is a proactive measure.”

Sherwood said since the Parkland incident, there have been more tips coming in.

“As people started to hear about what they should be reporting, they started

reporting more,” she said.

The most recent data shows that nearly 700 tips have come in over the past year, and close to 300 of those are for bullying and harassment. Other categories include possession or distribution of drugs, threat of assault, suicide threats (self-reported or reported by others), and sexual assault or harassment.

Roberts said the service is available for parents to report concerns, as well.

Roberts said they train their students how to use the reporting system every year, and that she and some Armand Larive students made a presentation about the service at a recent state school board conference. “If you are in a bad place, you can go get help,” Roberts said. “It’s helping to make school a positive place to come and learn and be themselves.”

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I-84: Cabbage Hill sees an average of 3.2 crashes each year

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In the region, I-84’s victims so far this year have included a 48-year-old Boardman man, a 50-year-old Spokane man and a 58-year old Pendleton woman returning home from Nixyaawii Community School’s championship basketball game in Baker City.

ODOT is taking on an multi-pronged, \$11 million project to try and prevent future crashes between Boardman and the Idaho border. The goal is to reduce all weather-related crashes per vehicle miles traveled by 25 percent by 2025, and speed-related crashes by 20 percent during that same time period.

“There are specific areas we know are trouble spots,” ODOT Region 5 spokesman Tom Strandberg said.

Danger often comes from a combination of speed, distracted driving and adverse weather conditions. According to ODOT, 60 percent of crashes on I-84 in Eastern Oregon are related to weather conditions, while speed was a factor in 70 percent.

For travelers trying to make decisions about whether it is safe to proceed through the coming miles, ODOT plans to install a new road camera at Milepost 247 near Spring Creek and 10 new road sensors that can automatically pick up on conditions like ice or snow, which can then be automatically broadcast over 12 new variable message signs along the interstate.

Lt. Mike Turner of the Oregon State Police’s Pendleton office said he and others from OSP spent several day-long sessions consulting with ODOT about ways to make the interstate safer. One of the big problems with the stretch of interstate between Pendleton and La Grande, he said, was that the conditions change so rapidly — roads might be bare and dry in one section and covered in ice two miles later.

“Drivers have to be really attentive to the road conditions,” he said. “Any time drivers can be notified of changing road conditions ahead, that’s a good thing.”

Strandberg said as self-driving cars and autonomous semi-trucks become more common, ODOT expects that such road condition information from sensors will be fed directly to vehicles on the road, helping the computer system know — among other things — to slow down before the vehicle hits the first patch of ice or snow.

On some stretches, particularly milepost 217-252 (including Cabbage Hill and Meacham), variable message signs will be used to post lower speed limits during poor road conditions. According to ODOT the signs could prevent an estimated nine crashes per year along that stretch alone.

On Cabbage Hill — which according to ODOT sees an average of 3.2

crashes per mile each year — two miles of westbound curves will be marked with LED lighting, making it easier for nighttime drivers to tell where the road curves ahead. The area will also get yellow reflective markers attached along more than 12 miles of guardrail.

In the Grande Ronde River Canyon west of La Grande — with an average of 3 crashes per mile per year — flashing curve warning signs will remind drivers to slow down and stay alert.

Strandberg said similar strategies have worked well in the Burnt River Canyon area south of Baker City, which got flashing lights, curve warnings and variable speed signs in 2006.

“We’ve really reduced crashes along there,” he said.

Along two different stretches, from Deadman’s Pass to the Meacham turnoff and near Spring Creek (Milepost 229-237 and 249-250 respectively) the department plans to put up steel cable barriers between the westbound and eastbound lanes to prevent crossover crashes. The small portion of Interstate 82 between I-84 and the Washington border was also studied and will likely see some enhanced delineation as well.

Turner said steel cable barriers are effective in preventing such crashes, but they do make it more difficult for law enforcement to turn around and head the other direction when responding to an emergency — something ODOT will take into consideration when designing the project.

Chain-up areas, particularly between La Grande and North Powder, will also be improved with systems that alert drivers to available space to park and put on chains, and ODOT is looking at remote-controlled gates and other improvements to help block off interchanges more quickly after a crash. The department will also be implementing new policies and procedures to improve the road closure process and reduce its impacts.

Both Strandberg and Turner said it was too early to have solid data on how the 2016 speed limit increase from 65 miles per hour to 70 has affected crashes, but they reminded drivers that the posted speed limit is the maximum speed that drivers should be going during ideal conditions. Rain, ice, snow, fog, darkness or other factors are a reason to slow down.

The overall Interstate 84 Corridor Management Plan is expected to be implemented in phases over the next few years, with new construction starting in 2019. \$4 million was allotted in the 2017 transportation package and the rest of the \$11 million will come from various sources.

“All of these things are going to be beneficial,” Strandberg said. “Now that it’s in this plan, it will be a lot easier to get funding.”

BRIEFLY

Women file to run for U.S. House seats in record numbers

CHERRY HILL, N.J. (AP) — The number of women running for the U.S. House of Representatives set a record Thursday, most of them Democrats motivated by angst over President Donald Trump and policies of the Republican-controlled Congress.

In many places, women are running for congressional seats that have never had female representation.

“It’s about time,” said Kara Eastman of Nebraska, one of two Democrats trying to win a primary and the right to challenge a GOP incumbent in a district centered in Omaha.

A surge of women into this year’s midterm elections had been expected since the Women’s March demonstrations nationwide just after Trump’s inauguration in January 2017. Numbers analyzed by The Associated Press show that momentum is continuing.

After Virginia released its candidate list Thursday, a total of 309 women from the two major parties have filed candidacy papers to run for the House. That tops the previous record of 298 in 2012.