

Missouri Expected to Extend Texting Ban to All Drivers

By Wes Duplantier
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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. — Missouri's ban on sending and reading text messages while driving was expected to be extended to drivers of all ages under legislation that moved to the Missouri Senate last week as the legislative session was scheduled to end.

The measure has become part of a larger public-safety bill that passed the House in April and was pending before a Senate committee last week.

A Missouri law passed in 2009 bans anyone 21 and under from texting while driving.

Rep. Don Wells, the sponsor of the pending anti-texting legislation, said he voted for the 2009 law but later regretted doing so because of the law's age threshold.

According to the Governor's Highway Safety Association, 31 states have laws banning all drivers from sending text messages behind the wheel. Nine more states have laws that limit texting while driving based on the driver's age or license status. Missouri's age limit is the highest among states with such a law.

"Missouri was the laughingstock of the country for passing that law," Wells said.

While outlawing texting while driving, Wells' legislation still would allow drivers to communicate on

hands-free devices such as Bluetooth carpieces. He said that would minimize distractions while driving.

One hurdle Wells' anti-texting legislation faced was the clock, which was ticking toward the end of the legislative session May 13.

The larger public-safety bill is set to go before a Senate judiciary committee on May 16. If the committee approves the bill, it could be debated by the full Senate. If the Senate does not modify to the bill, that chamber can vote to give the bill final passage and send it to Gov. Jay Nixon.

But the Senate could make changes to the bill, sending it back to the House for another vote.

That could take time, as many other bills are also jockeying for position on the legislative calendar.

Another potential roadblock is skepticism that extending the ban to all drivers would make the state's streets any safer.

Rep. Nick Marshall, who spoke against the anti-texting measure when it was before a House public safety committee, said the law would be too difficult to enforce. He also said it might cause people to think that government is intruding into more aspects of their lives.

"This law won't change people's behavior in the future," he said. "I think we do a disservice to the rule of law when we pass a law that people won't obey."

Missouri State Highway Patrol Cpt. Tim Hull said officers wrote 81 tickets for texting while driving between August 2009, when the law took effect, and the end of 2010.

He said the law is difficult to enforce because the officer must determine if a driver is sending a text message and then whether the driver is younger than 22. But he said officers could suspect people of texting while driving if drivers appear to be typing on a keyboard or looking down instead of at the road.

Proposals to ban texting while driving also have had support from cellphone companies. Industry groups have created public-service announcements aimed at discouraging teens from texting while driving, and lobbyists for Verizon and AT&T have spoken in support of the bills at legislative hearings in Missouri.

Verizon spokeswoman Brenda Hill said people can pull over to the side of the road if they have to send a text message.

"We want people to focus on driving while they're driving," she said.

Researchers have been examining how texting affects a driver's concentration. One 2009 study by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute gained national attention with its conclusion that drivers are 23 times more likely to crash if they are texting when behind the wheel.

Wells said he thinks findings like that will generate more support in the Senate for a full ban than there might have been in 2009, when the law was limited to young drivers.

"Since then, I think they've realized that it doesn't matter what your age is, it's still so dangerous," Wells said. "It's not just a safety issue for you, but for everyone who is on the highway."