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State Senate approves ban on texting while driving

By Patrick Marley of the Journal Sentinel

Posted: Oct. 20, 2009

A Day of Reforms

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- State Senate approves ban on texting while driving

Madison — A bill to ban texting while driving passed the Senate with overwhelming support from both parties and is headed to the Assembly.

An Assembly committee could hear a bill on texting as early as next week. Assembly leaders have not said whether they will take up the bill.

Lawmakers pushing the bill said texting while driving was especially dangerous because people were looking more at their cell phone than at the road.

Several studies have found that drivers of all ages who are texting or talking on their phones are as distracted as drunken drivers.

The bill would follow a national trend of legislation that cracks down on drivers' cell-phone use.

The measure passed 27-5, but only after senators debated and tossed aside a plan to limit the ban to only those younger than 18.

"Texting is an absolute distraction," said Sen. Alan Lasee (R-De Pere). "At least when you're on the telephone you can use two eyes to keep on the road."

Opponents said there was no need for the ban on using cell phones to send text messages because inattentive driving is already illegal.

"We have laws on the book right now where we can enforce this," said Sen. Neal Kedzie (R-Elkhorn).

Joining Kedzie in opposing the ban were Sens. Glenn Grothman (R-West Bend), Mary Lazich (R-New Berlin), Joe Leibham (R-Sheboygan) and Jeff Plale (D-South Milwaukee).

Lasee first wrote the bill to apply to all drivers, but agreed in committee to limit it to those younger than 18. But when it got to the Senate floor, a group of Republicans tried to amend the ban to make it apply to everyone.

That prompted anger from Majority Leader Russ Decker (D-Weston), who accused Lasee of going back on a deal to limit the bill to young people.

Decker tried to stop a final vote on the bill Tuesday, but Democrats who control the Senate decided to go along with the broader ban.

Another bill approved by the Senate would require children 12 and younger to wear life vests when they are on deck on boats that are less than 26 feet in length. It passed on a voice vote.

The Senate also approved an anti-bullying bill that would require the state Department of Public Instruction to write a model policy that defines and bans bullying and sets up a process for bullying to be confidentially reported and investigated.

"Schools should be a safe environment," Kedzie said. "It should not be a place of fear or dread that interferes with learning. It should be a safe haven."

It was sent to the Assembly on a 29-3 vote, with Grothman, Lazich and Leibham in dissent.

The Senate also gave final approval on a voice vote to a bill that bans electronic waste such as televisions and computers from landfills and requires electronics manufacturers to assume responsibility for these products. Voluntary recycling of electronics is on the rise, but advocates of the current system say it is inefficient and still captures only a small amount of the waste.

The legislation, patterned after a Minnesota law, is expected to sharply reduce the amount of electronic waste that heads to landfills each year. In Wisconsin, an estimated 10,000 tons of computer monitors and 24,000 tons of TVs are dumped each year, according to Sen. Mark Miller (D-Monona), co-sponsor of the legislation.

E-waste presents potential environmental problems because components such as cadmium, lead, mercury and chromium can leach into groundwater.

The measure earlier passed the Assembly and now goes to the governor.

Sen. Kathleen Vinehout (D-Alma) was absent Tuesday.

Lee Bergquist of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report from Milwaukee.