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Support grows for tougher teen driving rules

Kevin Botterman/Triblocal.com staff reporter 05/13/07 09:28 PM 49 hits

As Illinois moves closer to setting the toughest licensing requirements in the nation for teen drivers, area residents, including teens, driving instructors and police, believe the proposed changes will make the roads safer for all drivers.

State lawmakers this week advanced bills providing sharp restrictions on driving privileges and stricter penalties for anyone under age 18. The legislation would require teen drivers to practice with a learner's permit for nine months before getting a license. Currently the state only requires three months of practice.

The proposed changes also call for teen drivers to wait at least a year before they could have more than one teen passenger other than a family member in their vehicle, and would set an earlier curfew for drivers under age 18.

Also, teens convicted of drinking or simply just possessing alcohol would lose their driving privileges.

Timothy Smith, author of "Crashproof Your Kids" and a certified driving instructor, has been an advocate for safer driving laws and said the state's action on Tuesday will potentially save lives.

Smith is a father of three teens ages 13, 16 and 18 and lives in St. Charles. He became involved in the issue of teen driving and educating parents because of a rash of crashes involving teens a few years ago in the St. Charles area.

"To increase the parental supervision to nine months time before they can get a license and restrict passengers, these are good moves. Both of these things have shown to reduce teen crash rates," Smith said.

The changes being considered in Springfield would require Illinois curfew laws for those under age 18 to change to 10 p.m. on weekdays and 11 p.m. on weekends. Police may find this a challenge, Smith said.

"Some kids work evenings so they will need some kind of exemption. And I think the curfew will be tough to enforce," Smith said. "The idea is, lawmakers are following statistics and those indicate accident rates increase after 11 p.m. overall."

Batavia police department commander Gregory Thrun said he did not think the potential new laws and curfew changes would tax the local police departments.

"We're already paying attention to how many are in the car anyway. This can only help young drivers," Thrun said.

Growing attention to teen driving laws in the past year, partly from the Chicago Tribune's "Teens at the Wheel" examination of teen driving and partly because of tragic accidents involving teen drivers such as the Oswego accident that claimed the lives of five teenagers, has energized the traffic safety community and parents into taking action. Smith says his own children may think the new laws will be a pain, and his 13-year-old will not like having to wait longer for a license.

"Any time you restrict teens you'll get a little push back. But lives are going to be saved and that's the bottom line," Smith said.

It's a point State Sen. Chris Lauzen (R-Aurora) says he learned at his own home, after voting in favor of the proposed restrictions.

Lauzen's district includes Batavia and Geneva and he believes the tighter laws will improve traffic safety, even if his 14-year-old son doesn't agree.

"It wasn't a popular vote at my house, but I'd rather have him arguing with me than allow the current situation to continue," Lauzen said Wednesday.

The teenage students in an afternoon class at the Green Light Driving School in Batavia would not be affected by the changes contained in the proposed legislation, but said Thursday they think an earlier curfew would be a burden for teen drivers who work part-time jobs in the late evening hours and for students involved in extra-curricular activities such as sports.



Teenage students at the Green Light Driving School in Batavia complete a test on driving regulations.

"The earlier curfew could be tough for a lot of students who play sports," said Mike Hoefler, a freshman at Batavia High School.

"A lot of times it's past 10 p.m. when some of these sporting events finish," Hoefler said "What are you suppose to do if you are 16 or 17? Do you break curfew or do you wait for mom and dad to get you?"

More than two dozen students are enrolled in the driving class with Hoefler, all are age 15, and most indicated holding a learner's permit for nine months, as proposed in the pending legislation, would not be a burden for young drivers.

Students age 15 can begin driver's education and can apply for a learner's permit, under state law. The provision is a key factor in the growing popularity of commercial driving schools like Batavia's Green Light, because it allows more options for students and parents.

Driver's education programs at public schools require students to be 16 before they begin training. Many teens want to qualify for a driver's license by their 16th birthday and more parents are allowing students to enroll in driver's education at 15, to avoid the looming 9-month permitting period, said Lisa Pearson, operates the Green Light Driving School in Batavia and at new location in Bartlett.

Commercial driving schools can offer more classes, particularly during the summer months. Enrollment in the five-week long course at Pearson's school often reaches capacity in the summer months, she said.

Pearson's program also offers morning classes for home-schooled teens, and also provides education courses at three private suburban schools.

"Scheduling is a factor for everyone, and many parents don't want their kids missing an academic class just so they can take driver's ed during the school day," Pearson said.

Pearson also endorsed the longer permitting period, saying the six additional months would provide young drivers the opportunity to experience driving in a variety of weather conditions.

"There's no question that the longer period on the permit will make them safer drivers. The more lessons they learn during that period, the better it is for them and for others," Pearson said.

By Nancy Munson and Kevin Botterman
Triblocal.com reporters

To access the Chicago Tribune's Teens at the Wheel series go to [Teens at the Wheel](#)

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Cool teen safe driving resource

Safe and smart driving messages for teens are extremely important, but they're usually delivered by adults. At www.keepthedrive.com teens can talk with other teens in an upbeat, peer-to-peer environment about why smart driving skills matter to everyone - not just "those other kids." Check it out: www.keepthedrive.com Thanks

Response by [scott18](#) 05/14/07 02:53 PM

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