

# Future of cell phones while driving before NC Assembly

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Two bills have recently been proposed in the North Carolina General Assembly that, if passed, would make it illegal to operate a cellular phone while driving a car.

The bills, which were referred to committee two weeks ago, bar the use of hand-held cell phones and require a driver to either utilize some kind of hands-free device or to pull over to the side of the road when calling. Under the proposed bills, the first violation would result in a \$25 fine.

The correlation between driving and cell phones has increasingly become a controversial safety issue. More and more states across the country, like North Carolina, are now trying to get laws passed banning their use in cars. Only three — California, Massachusetts and Florida — thus far, have passed any restrictions on cell phones. And as of yet, no state has been able to enforce an outright ban.

In New Hanover County, there is currently a drafted resolution by the Board of Health that cites the dangers of cell phones and driving. The resolution is different from a law in that it is merely a "position statement," said David Howard, the injury prevention and health educator of New Hanover County.

"It's a public education program" designed to help reduce "the number of (automobile) crashes due to distractions and inattention," Howard said.

Howard feels the resolution is especially important to New Hanover County, which, according to Howard, ranks above all other counties in the state in crash rate per 100 miles of travel, non-fatal injury crash rate and crash injury per 100 people.

Proponents of cell phone legislation insist that conclusive studies have shown that cell phones do cause accidents. A study by the University of Toronto was published in the New England Journal of Medicine in 1997. The results revealed that the risk of getting in an accident is quadrupled when using a cell phone, a rate nearly identical to that of driving while under the influence.

"Intoxication is merely a distraction which enhances the probability of accidents resulting in injury or death. Talking on a cell phone while driving produces the same kinds of risks. It is very difficult for me to justify a law banning one but not the other," said Mike Adams, associate professor of criminal justice at UNC Wilmington.

Adams' viewpoint that "cell phone legislation is badly needed and completely justified" comes, in part, from his own personal experience with a cell phone driver.

While running, Adams was "nearly struck by a woman in an SUV," he said.

The woman just happened to be talking on her cell phone at the time of the near accident.

Others at UNCW agree with the need for legislation.

"I don't think you should talk and drive at the same time because you're not paying attention to the road," said Miri Gaines, a sophomore.

Gaines also has first-hand experience with the issue. She was rear-ended by another cell phone user who was not paying attention to the road.

"I have a cell phone, but I don't use it when I'm driving," said freshman Craig Hewett.

Judging by their proven unpopularity, most people seem opposed to passing any such laws. They feel

cell phones are just one of many potential distractions for drivers and putting a ban on them would mean having to put a ban on things like eating or changing music while driving. Some opponents feel it comes down to a question of individual responsibility.

"It's kind of everyone's own responsibility...there are some drivers that are terrible without a cell phone to begin with," said freshman Brett Friday, who enjoys the advantages of using a cell phone to call friends and family every now and then and to notify people when he is late.

"It's not a problem, it's just common sense," said sophomore Greg

Young. (The laws were) "putting too many regulations on the industry."

Many like Young wonder how the proposed legislation might affect a rapidly growing business, which now provides service for over 100 million Americans.

"I don't think it is going to hurt our business at all," said Drew Menard, lead salesperson at Airwaves, a local cell phone distributor.

Graphic by Gabe Herman

"There are so many new (hands-free) accessories" that are being made available to the consumer, like ear pieces and speaker phones."

Airwaves offers "packages with a hands-free accessory as well as an ear piece," Menard said. "Most manufacturers provide an instruction booklet, which promotes safe use especially when driving."

If the legislation is passed, the new law will go in effect on December 1.



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