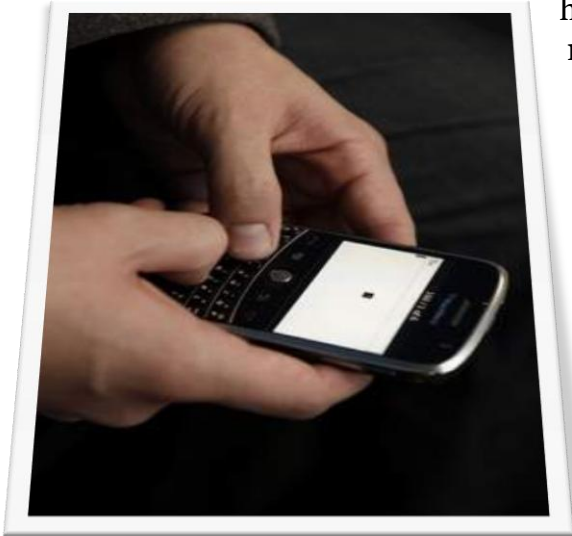


TEXTING WHILE DRIVING

Measures banning motorists from text messaging and using cell phones are becoming hot topics this fall for Florida lawmakers intent on making a U-turn on legislation that formerly went nowhere.



Some kind of ban on hand-held communications has been proposed each of the past seven years. But the few bills filed last spring failed to draw even a committee hearing.

But as cell phone applications become more sophisticated and teenagers and adults appear increasingly tethered to keypads, a dozen bills have been filed in the House and Senate aimed at prohibiting drivers from writing on their BlackBerrys or talking on cell phones.

The measures spring from both Democrats and Republicans, with the latest two added to the pile this month.

They follow a spate of troubling findings: One recent study found that motorists who use cell phones while driving are more impaired than drivers who have a blood-alcohol level of 0.08 percent, the level at which Florida drivers are considered intoxicated. Another study found that teenagers who text while driving are 23 times more likely to crash.

Three of the bills' sponsors are also candidates for statewide office: Sens. Carey Baker and Paula Dockery, Republican contenders for agriculture commissioner and governor, respectively; and Sen. Dan Gelber, a Democratic candidate for attorney general.

Baker, R-Eustis, was an early advocate of banning texting while driving, introducing legislation two years ago.

Legislation prohibiting cell phone use without a headset was first proposed in Florida in 2002. "It's slowly been building," Two bills already filed ([SB 324](#)) that prohibit texting while driving and plans to come back with a repeat of earlier legislation that would ban motorists younger than 18 from using any kind of electronic wireless communications while driving — meaning no cell phones, laptops or hand-helds.

By contrast, Sen. Frederica Wilson, D-Miami, has legislation ([SB 244](#)) that requires headsets for all drivers using cell phones, while prohibiting texting.

Talking or listening on a cell phone is among the most frequently cited distractions affecting drivers involved in a serious auto crash, according to the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 14 states and Washington, D.C., have passed legislation banning texting while driving, while others have banned it for drivers with learner's permits. Six states and the District of Columbia have banned hand-held phones while driving.