



# Scott Stroud: Tougher rules for older drivers could affect their independence

Web Posted: 01/27/2007 10:04 PM CST

## San Antonio Express-News

BOERNE — If Florence George takes another driving test, she doesn't think she will pass. Her eyes aren't what they used to be.

But there was George, on the verge of her 97th birthday, pattering around Boerne on Friday morning in her white '92 Dodge Spirit.

She peered through glasses over the steering wheel as she made her way from the Rainbow Senior Center past the library.

Crossing Main Street, she pointed out her apartment on East San Antonio, the U.S. Post Office two blocks away, the First United Methodist Church and the grocery store — a tour, basically, of the landmarks of her life since she moved to Boerne in 1991 to be near her son.

George, whose face was framed by soft, white hair and tiny, dangling sun-splash earrings, handled the car just fine. She stuck to side streets for the most part. Her speed topped out at 40 mph on a downhill stretch of School Street.

A cabdriver once upon a time, she said she avoids Main Street on Saturdays, stays off the highways and never drives at night.

If new legislation being offered in Austin becomes law, George no longer would be able to take driving for granted. House Bill 84, sponsored by Rep. Dan Branch, would cause a driver's license to expire on the license holder's 90th birthday and require retesting every two years after that.

The legislation was inspired, in part, by a wreck in the Dallas area less than a year ago. Katie Bolka, 17, was on her way to school last spring when a 90-year-old driver drove through a stoplight, struck her car and killed her. Her father may testify for the bill.

It's hard to argue with getting unsafe drivers off the roads. If the bill passed, Texas would join more than a dozen states requiring more frequent license renewal for elderly drivers, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

And yet doing that raises another wrenching question. Taking away the licenses of elderly drivers sometimes removes the last vestiges of independence.

"It's devastating," said Carolyn Stauss, executive director of the Rainbow Senior Center, a nonprofit facility that provides meals and fellowship for elderly residents in Boerne. "They know they're winding down when it's absent."

Stauss said more testing was fine with her "for their safety," but it does make life harder. The Rainbow Center has vans and drivers to help its clients get around, but not enough.

"If I had two more vans and two more drivers, we could keep them all busy," Stauss said. "But we just don't have the

funding."

Branch said some thought should be given to helping seniors maintain their independence. Perhaps a restricted license, one that prohibits highway driving or driving at night, might be worth a look.

Spending government money to help seniors get around also should be considered, he said. That already happens to some degree in the state's urban areas.

Boerne is more navigable than Dallas, of course, but the soft-spoken George said she doesn't want to keep driving if she's a danger.

"I feel like I'll soon quit," she said.

She dropped me off in the Rainbow Center parking lot and headed off for a dentist appointment. I walked to my car past eight vehicles, only four of which were successfully situated between the parallel lines on the pavement.

Before that, though, I stood and waved goodbye, but I don't think George saw me. She was peering off to her left, watching for oncoming traffic as she eased out into the roadway.

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