

Senior drivers may face vision tests

Legislature: Exams would start at age 79; little opposition offered

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AUSTIN – Elderly Texas drivers would face periodic vision tests beginning at age 79, and possibly a driving test at 85, under a bill approved by the Senate transportation committee Wednesday.

The bill has faced little opposition so far and is on the fast track to passage. The committee passed it unanimously and put it on the Senate's local and uncontested calendar, meaning it will not be debated before a vote by the full Senate unless a senator objects.

"All the statistical evidence is clearly on the side of this legislation," said Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, chairman of the transportation committee and author of the bill.

"Older drivers, per mile driven, have far more accidents than any other classification of driver. While there will be senior citizens who have reservations about this bill, all we're doing is making them come in and have a vision test at 79. And that will be good for six years."

In addition to the vision test at age 79, Mr. Carona's bill would require drivers to renew their licenses every two years after they turn 85. The fee would be \$10, and officers would have the discretion to order a driving test as well.

The House Law Enforcement Committee approved a companion bill on Wednesday that sets 90 as the age when older drivers must renew their license with a vision test. A compromise would be worked out between the House and Senate if both pass.

The House and Senate measures have been called "Katie's Law" in memory of Dallas teenager Katherine "Katie" Bolka, 17. The girl was driving to Ursuline Academy for a final exam May 30 when her car was struck by a 90-year-old driver at the intersection of Preston Road and Royal Lane. The driver who hit Katie was speeding and ran a stoplight that had been red almost 30 seconds. Katie died five days later.

Her parents, Rick and Johna Bolka of Dallas, testified in favor of the bill at a legislative hearing earlier this week.

"My daughter's death touched the entire community," Ms. Bolka said. "It was about recognizing that this could have happened to anyone."

She quoted a passage from Katie's journal: "In my life, you get one chance, and I want to get it right from the start," the girl wrote.

"I'm going to quote Katie's words," Ms. Bolka said, "because I sure do hope we get this bill right."

WHAT'S AT STAKE

The Senate bill would require elderly drivers to:

Renew their licenses, with a vision test, at **age 79**.

Renew their licenses, with a vision test, at **age 85** and every two years thereafter.

Take a driving test at **age 85** and older if the testing officer deems it necessary.

Pay \$10 for the renewals.

One driver's lament

Those testifying also included the parents of a 15-year-old Houston-area girl, Shannon Stovall, who was killed when a car driven by an 83-year-old man jumped a curb and pinned her against a tree. That fatal accident happened six days before Katie's.

The driver in Shannon's accident, now too ill to attend the hearing, sent a letter that was read into the record. In it, he urged lawmakers to adopt testing for elderly drivers.

"My life has never been the same since that night," he wrote. "I will eventually take it to my grave."

"I would only hope and pray that no one else would go through this experience."

A spokesman for AARP-Texas voiced concerns about the measure, even though the group – which lobbies on legislation affecting senior citizens – did not testify against the proposal.

"We want our roads to be safe for everybody, but we don't want to discriminate against older people," said the spokesman, Rafael Ayuso.

"Research shows that younger drivers have much higher accident rates than older drivers, and to some extent, these efforts [to pass legislation] can be seen as using older people as an easy target."

Mr. Ayuso also voiced reservations about a provision in the bill that would allow a DPS officer to require a driving test for a motorist 85 or older if the officer deemed it necessary based on his or her observations.

"This is particularly a concern given the importance of driving to the independence of many older Texans," he said.

While the group said it is aware of research that supports mandatory vision tests for drivers who are 85, it is not aware of any research that supports vision tests for drivers when they turn 79.

'A real problem'

Mr. Carona said the vision tests for seniors "is a politically sensitive issue, but people recognize it is a real problem. You can talk to law enforcement officers or people in just about any community, and they know of elderly drivers who should be subjected to more scrutiny."

The Dallas Republican noted that his mother, who suffers from diabetes and is nearly blind, recently renewed her Texas driver's license by mail.

"The idea is not to take older drivers off the road, just to make sure they are proficient enough to drive safely on our roadways," he said.

Rep. Dan Branch, R-Dallas, author of the House version, also cited increasing concern over the state's oldest drivers.

He noted that studies by insurance companies show that some seniors 80 and older can become high-risk drivers as their sight and responsiveness deteriorate.

Figures from the Texas Department of Public Safety indicate there are 157,921 licensed drivers ages 85 to 90, and 248,874 drivers who are older. Officials noted that some of those who are licensed no longer drive and that the numbers include some seniors who might have died. Records are not removed from state data files for up to two years after people have died.