

NEWS **Local News Columnist**
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Elderly drivers may be put to the test

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I was feeling only a twinge of test anxiety when the examiner mentioned a couple of dreaded words.

"Parallel parking!?" I blurted. "I thought that wasn't part of driving tests anymore."

Amy Simmons just smiled. She was sitting in the passenger seat of my pickup, clipboard and score sheet in hand. "No," she said, "it's still part of the test. In fact, we'll start with that."

I gulped and pulled the truck into gear.

Last week, I voluntarily subjected myself to a driving test after reading that state legislators are moving closer to greater scrutiny of elderly drivers. And bravo to legislators for showing some courage in the face of unhappy seniors – a powerful voting bloc.

To you older drivers, relax. The coming changes are entirely reasonable and won't require many to take a driving test.

For those who doubt the wisdom of the new requirements, I wish they could have been with me last June when I sat in Rick and Johna Bolka's Lake Highlands home.

It had been 10 days since the death of their 17-year-old daughter, Katie. And I had never witnessed the kind of crushing, bone-deep grief that smothered the Bolkas.

Bright, artistic Katie had been driving to school for final exams when a 90-year-old woman ran a red light and smashed into her car.

Even from the depths of their grief, the Bolkas had promised to work for change. They gathered research showing

Katie's tragedy wasn't unique. Per miles driven, elderly drivers have more frequent and deadly accidents than any other age group.

The couple then began contacting state legislators, looking for common-sense answers.

What emerged is basically a plan to require older drivers to periodically present themselves at driver's license offices for vision tests – starting at age 79 in the Senate version, age 90 in the House version. No more automatic, mail-in license renewals.

The Bolkas will push for the Senate version when a conference committee takes up the two bills. "It's a good first step," Rick said last week.

Rick said the real significance is that vision tests would give Department of Public Safety workers a chance to assess the overall health and capabilities of older drivers. When there are questions, a driving test can be required.

That's something the DPS already has the authority to do. In fact, a doctor, police officer or family member can write to the DPS with concerns about a driver's abilities. That person will be interviewed and asked to take a driving test when deemed necessary.

Amy said she has given a number of such driving tests, and elderly drivers generally do well. "They're more cautious," she said.

So how did I do?

Well, I got a demerit that very first moment when I gulped and put my truck in gear. Even in a parking lot, I should have used my turn signal, Amy told me later.

Even with my performance anxiety, the parallel parking went well. I easily backed into the ample spot between yellow plastic poles. (Knocking over a pole is an automatic failure.)

Next came about 10 minutes of driving at Amy's instruction. Turn right here. Left there. Stop here. Back straight up. As much as possible, I tried to drive just as I normally do.

"Well, you survived," she said when we returned to the DPS office.

"But did I pass?" I said.

"Sure," she said. "I deducted 12 points from a total of 100." You fail after losing more than 30 points.

My sins included failure to use turn signals, swinging slightly into an adjacent lane on a turn, resting my hands too casually on the steering wheel and stopping in a crosswalk at a traffic light.

"You did better than most," Ms. Simmons said. My chest swelled.

Does she really fail some people? "Daily," she said.

And what is her major advice to all drivers? "Just be more aware," she said.

We do tend to get pretty relaxed behind the wheel. The Bolkas would have us remember just how devastating a moment of inattention can be – at any age.