

House Bill could force elderly to backseat

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— By Amy Moore

The News staff writer

Nonalene Dunlap said even though she's 85-years old, she's "still getting down the road." But that could change with a new bill signed by Gov. Rick Perry Wednesday.

House Bill 84 requires drivers 85-years and older to renew their drivers licenses in person every two years. Effective Sept. 1 of this year, elderly drivers must pass a vision and possibly a driving test in order to renew their licenses. Sponsored by Sen. John Carona of District 16 in Dallas County, HB 84 is known as Katie's Law. Last May, 17-year old Katie Bolka was killed by a 90-year-old driver who was driving seven miles per hour over the speed limit and ran a light. Bolka sustained fatal injuries after fighting for her life for five and a half days.

"I've been fighting for this for 15 years but legislation is difficult to pass because the elderly have been fighting it," Carona said. "Many elderly people continue to renew their drivers licenses even after they stop driving just because having one is a freedom, it's a freedom at any age. They feel like we're taking away their freedoms, but driving is not a right, it's a privilege."

With sight a fundamental element in driving, the Senator said the problem of elderly drivers recently became an issue in his own life when his blind mother received an automatic drivers license renewal in the mail.

"This bill is a step in the right direction," he said.

But Dunlap doesn't agree. The Port Neches native said having to go to the DPS office in downtown Port Arthur every two years for a driving test would be too big of a hassle.

"I think they ought to leave it like it was," said Dunlap, who recently drove to Arkansas and said she has not had a wreck since she's been driving.

Ethel Pat Laughlin said even though she drives herself around town nearly every day, she understands that there is a problem with other elderly drivers.

"I do know it's dangerous, I know that," the 78-year-old said. "There's a man at the senior center who is legally blind and he still drives.

"What I think they should do is check driving records for tickets and wrecks and go by that," she said.

Carona explained that with Katie's Law, elderly drivers will have to begin renewal at age 79. Once drivers are 85-years old, they will have to pass a vision test every two years to renew their licenses.

"If officers see that the driver is having trouble getting around the office, they can ask the person to take a driving test, but it's not required," he said.

Rhonda Pagan, director of the Port Neches Senior Citizen Center, said she doesn't think many of her visitors will be able to pass a vision test when they get older.

"And I worry about if they start making them pass a hearing test because I know a lot of them couldn't do it," she said.

"In my opinion, many elderly people will drive around with expired licenses, especially the ones who only drive in town."

Regulating elderly drivers is not the only thing the state is doing to make driving safer. Carona said increasing the size of lettering on highway signs and improving the lighting on roadways to help with night vision are only a few of the steps the legislature is taking to make Texas roadways safer.