



**NEWS** Local News

# For license, elderly must go extra mile

New law requires in-person renewals for drivers 79 and older

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By **MICHAEL A. LINDENBERGER** / The Dallas Morning News

## LEGISLATING

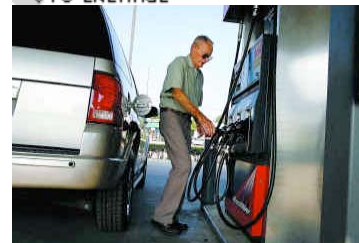
**YOUR LIFE** When Ken Little wants to go somewhere, he drives – just like he has for the last 70 years.

"I don't drive that often, maybe three or four times a week. But when I do drive, I go a long way. We're out here in the sticks," said Mr. Little, who four years ago moved from San Diego to just outside Forney. "It does make me wonder what might happen if I become physically incapacitated or if I can't drive. I am going to be up a creek, really."

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**G.J. MCCARTHY/DMN**  
Ken Little stopped for gas on his way to a Mesquite health center Wednesday. 'For me, it's going to be a very traumatic thing when I can't drive,' he said. 'But I hope that when I reach that point, I can give it up.' since the May 2006 accident.

Beginning Saturday, Texas drivers 85 and older will be thinking anew about their dependence on automobiles. At age 86, Mr. Little is among them. Basically, the Legislature has made it tougher for older drivers to renew their licenses.

The new law will require drivers 79 and older to renew their licenses in person, rather than over the Internet or through the mail. In addition, drivers 85 and older will have to renew their licenses every two years and must pass a vision test. Younger drivers get six years between renewals.

The changes are part of Katie's Law, legislation that cleared both chambers without a single no vote in the wake of last year's death of 17-year-old Katherine "Katie" Bolka of Dallas. She died after a 90-year-old driver ran a red light and crashed into her car at Preston Road and Royal Lane.

The new law doesn't ease the pain of their loss, but Katie's parents, Rick and Johna Bolka, said it does help ensure that others won't go through what they've endured

**G.J. MCCARTHY/DMN**  
Ken Little, 86, puts on sunglasses before leaving his home near Forney. He protested the legislation but now accepts it.

"I am happy the bill passed," Ms. Bolka said.

The Bolkas lobbied hard for passage because they want to get older drivers out from behind the wheel when health issues render them unable to drive safely.

"We're absolutely happy this is going to go into effect," Mr. Bolka said. "Texas now enters into a relatively small group of states which require more frequent license renewals for elderly drivers."

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reported this year that Texas will be the 17th state to impose an accelerated renewal schedule on older drivers. Age limits and frequency of renewal vary from state to state.

State Rep. Dan Branch, R-Dallas, sponsored the bill in the Texas House and said it should save lives.

"We do a lot in Texas, as in many other states, to regulate driving at the youthful end of the spectrum, but we had never really addressed the other end," Mr. Branch said. "So this was the first time in Texas that we had attempted to regulate driving on the most senior end of that life cycle."

Mr. Branch said the measure initially drew opposition from traditional senior lobbying groups, such as AARP. But the group dropped its opposition after lawmakers made some changes to the bill, he said.

Probably the biggest compromise was removal of language that would have required driving tests for those 85 and older who wanted to renew their licenses. The final bill does not include that requirement.

Mr. Branch said state law already allows Department of Public Safety employees to require such a test if applicants appear disoriented or otherwise unable to drive.

"No one likes to have any discrimination on the basis of age," he said. "But we already have created discrimination against youth drivers on basis of their ages, and this seemed appropriate."

Mr. Branch and Mr. Bolka said the most important aspect of the new law is the requirement that older drivers renew their licenses every two years – something that should make it easier for officials to spot conditions affecting their driving ability.

A person's health can change rapidly with age, Mr. Bolka said.

"You know that someone who is older may be just fine today, but their health can deteriorate very quickly," he said. "They could have a stroke or a lot of things could happen."

When the bill was first discussed, Mr. Little reacted with dismay. He wrote a letter to the editor calling the changes "socialism," and pointed out that teenagers have more accidents than elderly drivers. (Mr. Branch said that's true but noted that seniors drive less and have a higher rate of accidents per mile driven.)

But this week, Mr. Little said he just wishes Texas drivers would slow down and drive more carefully – like the drivers he was used to in California. He said he's prepared to comply with the new requirements.

"I can manage it," he said. "I think I will have to go all the way to Rockwall to do it, maybe 26 miles. But I can manage."

Mr. Bolka said the new law isn't about making life harder on elderly drivers. He said his parents are in their late 70s, though they live out of state. The new law also could save an older driver's life, he said.

"This isn't just about putting stringent requirements on a particular demographic of our society," he said. "It also protects the older drivers."

Taking away the keys, he said, can be a tough decision – one that drivers and their families are often reluctant to make. The new law is a step toward greater community involvement in those decisions and could lead to better laws that build on the one taking effect Saturday, he said.

"You cannot rely on the individual, and you can't rely on the individual's family, and often you can't really rely on physicians either," Mr. Bolka said. "That is where government has a responsibility to protect all its citizens, and all of us who share the roads, from unfit drivers."