

□ *Editor's note: This is one of several upcoming stories that will focus on bills introduced in the 2013 Nebraska Legislature and how they affect Imperial area residents.*

By Carolyn Lee

The Imperial Republican

A bill introduced in the Nebraska Legislature in January, if passed, would toughen up laws concerning driving while texting.

LB 118 was introduced by Sen. John Harms of Scottsbluff. It changes enforcement provisions for using a handheld wireless communication device while operating a motor vehicle.

In the past, a law enforcement agency could only cite a driver for texting while driving if that driver had already been cited or charged with a traffic violation or some other offense.

LB118 would allow law officers to pull over and cite a driver just for texting while driving.

The bill says that persons found guilty will be assessed points on his or her motor vehicle operator's license, and shall be fined \$200 for a first offense; \$300 for second offense and \$500 for a third and subsequent offenses.

Imperial Police Chief Rob Browning thinks the restriction on texting while driving is a good idea.

How to tell if a person is texting while driving is a different matter.

"I have no idea" how to know if a driver is texting "unless you see their inattention, them looking down," he stated.

Browning also isn't sure how law enforcement can prove that a person was texting.

"Are you going to have to subpoena their cell phone records?" he asked.

Browning said that his office has not ever cited someone for texting as a secondary offense, meaning that they've been detected texting while being stopped for another vehicle offense.

"I suppose you could subpoena records if they're involved in an accident that show they were texting at the time of the crash," he said.

Is texting while driving in Imperial a problem? Browning doesn't think so.

"I'd like to think everyone here's responsible enough," he said.

According to textinganddrivingsafety.com, in 2011, 23 percent of auto collisions involved cell phones, or 1.3 million crashes.

Thirteen percent of drivers age 18-20 involved in car wrecks admitted to texting or talking on mobile devices at the time of the crash.

Thirty-four percent of teens age 16-17 admit to texting while driving and 52 percent admit to talking on a cell phone while driving.

Teens who text while driving spend 10 percent of their driving time outside of their lane.

According to authorities, the average time attention is taken away from the road while texting is five seconds. Driving at a speed of 55 miles per hour, that is the length of a football field.

According to the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration, texting while driving is more likely to cause an accident than driving while intoxicated. It is the number one driving distraction reported by teen drivers.

The Institute for Highway Safety Fatality Facts reports that there are 11 teen deaths every day caused by texting while driving.

LB118 had its first reading in the Transportation and Telecommunications Committee Jan. 11.