

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Buckle Up! It's the law

The Legislature has once again enacted a seat belt law so that Massachusetts drivers, like those of 46 other states, must wear seat belts when riding in automobiles. The last day of the 1993 session produced this law, and its passage came only after many hours of suspense.

The issue has been batted back and forth between lawmakers and the governor for weeks, as we enacted, he amended, we persevered, and he finally vetoed the bill. As the House of Representatives began our last working day on Jan. 4, the votes to override that veto were insufficient to provide the necessary two thirds of the voting membership. Evening approached, and the speaker of the House announced that a vote was scheduled for 7:30, signaling that the magic number had been attained. Sure enough, the roll call was 102 votes for mandatory seat belts, 49 against.

I have long supported the concept of a seat belt law, and after checking on several aspects of the Massachusetts bill, I also supported our initiative. I was looking for these assurances. First, I ascertained that a motorist cannot be stopped by officers for the sole reason of not wearing a seat belt. A provision known as a secondary enforcement dictates that a citation can be issued only if there is another, primary violation of the law. Second and equally important, a seat belt violation is not reported to auto insurers as a moving violation. In other words, a violation does not impact your future insurance rates.

Seat belts are one of the defining issues among people I have talked with at the grocery store or while waiting in line at the bank. While choosing to buckle up themselves, some feel they have no right to place the mandate on all motorists. Others feel that the proven safety factor justifies the mandate, comparing it to society mandating motorcycle helmets and setting speed limits for the common good.

All of us have a story to share. My own story tells of an elderly relative who never liked seat belts. She permanently disabled the system in her car because of its nuisance. Then her state passed a seat belt law, and she always obeys the law. Not only does she buckle up now, she also reminds the rest of us to buckle up as well. Her new habit is a specific result of such a law. Her response multiplied by thousands will improve the safety statistics for Massachusetts. None of us expects to be in an accident, but those who are will be injured less severely. That improvement will at the same time lessen insurance costs as medical charges are reduced.

Whatever your personal opinion is, the state benefits monetarily by its new access to federal highway money that had been withheld because of our failure to regulate seat belt use. The law mandates an insurance rate reduction once belt usage in the State reaches 50 percent, which will add to the personal benefits, making the arrangement a financial boon for all of us.

Best wishes for a safe and happy 1994.