

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Saving Teen Drivers: Chapter 2

New drivers face higher risks than those of us with a few miles on the odometer. Everyone thinks that and, if we doubt it, we have only to look to accident statistics to confirm the belief. Massachusetts has long taken these risks into account with driving laws and regulations.

A few years ago we moved to add new restrictions, and the accident rate for 16-year-old drivers fell from 40% to 34%. However, kids continued to die in horrific late-night accidents. Now we are trying again. I wrote about our new Junior Operators bill last summer, and now that it is going into effect, I am once again explaining what it does.

As of last weekend, the consequences of violations are more serious and driver training more expensive. The goal, if the law succeeds, is to allow more junior drivers to live beyond their first years behind the wheel.

Here are some of the changes.

Immediate changes involve new tough penalties for infractions. A speeding ticket for driving more than 10 miles over the limit carries a 90-day suspension in addition to fines and retraining courses. A second infraction carries a year's suspension and a fee of \$500 for license reinstatement. Driving offenses involving drugs or alcohol are grounds for license suspension of a year, 6 months if the driver is over 18.

As before, young drivers are prohibited from driving with other teens in the car for the first six months of licensure, a practice that has been ignored by many teens and their parents. That practice is now a "primary" offense, so police can stop a car for that violation alone. And it carries a suspension up to 90 days.

All suspensions are in addition to other court penalties that may be imposed.

Driver training requirements will be increased in September of this year, our attempt to put drivers on the road with more knowledge and experience. If you are between 16 ½ and 18 years old, you will have to complete 30 hours of classroom instruction, 6 hours of driving with an instructor and 6 hours observing another student driver. Your parent or guardian must attend two hours with you in class and certify that you have driven for an additional 12 hours under adult supervision.

The rules are tough, and I expect to hear complaints as they impact students. The legislative intent is simple, to protect them in their first years behind the wheel. Here is my advice to would-be Junior Operators:

Educational changes will make your license cost more, so it's not too early to start saving for your driver training classes. You can avoid the training classes only if you wait until you are 18 to get your license.

Sanctions for violations are severe. Please pay attention to the new rules. You can avoid a speeding ticket if you pay attention to the speedometer in front of you. You won't be charged with driving under the influence if you don't drive under the influence. And you can tell your friends that you will not risk losing your license by driving them around before you pass that 6-month mark of licensure.

Good luck as you work to advance through Junior Operator status to join the world of adult drivers.

NOTE: If you have questions about the full provisions of the new law, please contact me at mary@rogeness.com or 567-1661.