



U.S. Department of
Transportation

News:

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Washington, D.C. 20590

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AMERICAN LEGISLATIVE EXCHANGE COUNCIL
TRANSPORTATION SAFETY CONFERENCE
DALLAS, TEXAS
MARCH 2, 1985

I congratulate the American Legislative Exchange Council on your outstanding effort in this Transportation Safety Conference. I know you have already heard Secretary Dole on videotape, but I want to emphasize her untiring dedication to the cause of transportation safety. The Reagan Administration believes that transportation's progress towards exciting new horizons in economic freedom goes hand-in-hand with a renewed and vigorous commitment to safety. The Administration stands ready to assist you in any way we can. As President Reagan told the American people in a weekly radio address a short while ago, "if we insist long enough and loudly enough, we can save lives."

I applaud those of you who have already expressed support for mandatory safety belt use legislation. You are on the cutting edge of this effort. As Secretary Dole noted, New York, New Jersey and Illinois were the first states to enact belt use laws. In Michigan and Missouri, laws are awaiting the signature of the governors. More than thirty state legislatures and the District of Columbia have safety belt use laws pending. Many of you will take a stand on this issue in the months ahead. I know your decision requires thoughtfulness, understanding and prudence. Your decision may not be easy, for this is not a simple issue. Strong feelings exist on both sides.

Today I want to tell you why I think state laws requiring occupants to "buckle up" make sense. I want to counter the arguments and dispel the myths you may confront as you debate this issue on the floor of your own state legislature. Let me add that there are few issues which generate more emotion and misunderstandings than protection of the occupants of automobiles.

Let me take a moment to remind you of the magnitude of the problem. More than 40,000 people will be killed in motor vehicle accidents this year. Nearly half of

the victims will be occupants of the front seat of passenger cars. More than 300,000 will be seriously injured. Many of those fatalities and injuries could be prevented by the use of safety belts.

The most frequent argument against a mandatory safety belt use law is that it would be "federally-imposed." This is myth. If I leave you with no other message today, I want you to know this: the federal government is not trying to force you to pass mandatory safety belt use laws. We are giving the American people the option between automatic crash protection systems -- such as air bags or automatic safety belts -- and safety belt use laws. Our occupant protection decision, which is required by federal laws as interpreted by the Supreme Court says that one or the other must go into effect.

The debate on automatic crash protection for motorists is not new. It has been in progress since the 1960s. The National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 directs the Secretary to "reduce traffic accidents and deaths and injuries to persons resulting from traffic accidents." The Act authorizes the Secretary of Transportation to issue Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards. Since the initial issuance of the section of the standards dealing with protection of occupants, there have been approximately 60 rulemaking documents issued with respect to it. As originally issued in 1967, the rule merely required manual seat belts. In 1970 the agency amended the rule to include requirements for installation of automatic occupant protection. Regulatory and judicial reviews continued. This rule has a history of law suits: the Sixth Circuit Court decided in 1972 that testing procedures were not adequate. There is also a history of Congressional intervention: Congress overruled the interlock device in 1974.

In 1975, the Department deleted the automatic restraint requirement. The rule also has a history of attempts to gain public acceptance. In 1976 then Secretary William T. Coleman initiated a rulemaking which led to a demonstration program. The requirement was not reissued until 1977 by then Secretary Brock Adams. In 1981 the Department's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration rescinded the Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard that would have required the front seat positions in all new cars to be equipped with automatic restraints. Law suits were filed. The issue was taken to the Supreme Court. On June 24, 1983, the Supreme Court held that the Department had been too quick in dismissing the benefits of detachable automatic belts. The Court asked us to take a second look. We did just that.

Based on our extensive review, we revised our 1981 assessment. The new facts led to the conclusion that the costs of automatic restraint systems were reasonable, when compared to the overwhelming potential benefits in lives saved and injuries reduced. Furthermore, the costs of safety belt use laws were much lower. Their effectiveness was even greater. With this evidence in hand, the Secretary announced a rule last July that provides the American people a choice between the two approaches.

Another frequent argument is that it is not the government's role to require citizens to wear safety belts. Some have even argued that they should be allowed the freedom to kill themselves if they want. Think about that for a minute. When you go through the windshield of your car, and are killed or seriously injured, the impact on your family and fellow citizens is profound. If you are the primary wage earner, your family may immediately face severe financial difficulties in addition to their grief. If

you incur huge medical bills not fully covered by insurance, their financial burdens will be compounded. If you have the good fortune to survive, you may face many years as an invalid, with your family having to make immense sacrifices to care for you.

The economic costs immediately imposed on the taxpayers by these tragedies are staggering. The bill for states and localities is \$3 1/2 billion a year. This includes payments to victims or survivors, Medicaid, welfare and workmen's compensation, lost revenue and other costs. The cost to the federal government is \$2 1/2 billion annually. This includes the expenses of public assistance, food stamps, survivors benefits, and more. The federal government also loses an estimated \$5 billion in tax revenues.

Automobile insurance premiums, which are imposed by law on every car owner in this country, are also higher than would otherwise be the case because of claims by unbelted victims. These are more than mere numbers. They represent human beings. The cost in human terms is even higher: no one can measure the suffering and grief of crash victims and their families. It is very clear that if everyone buckled up, up to ten thousand lives per year could be saved.

Not only would such laws save lives now, they would save more lives than restraints such as airbags or automatic safety belts. Consider this comparison: each proposed state law would immediately cover the entire fleet of automobiles within the state. We would not have to wait 10 to 15 years for an automatic occupant protection system to become installed in the entire fleet through replacement of old cars with new ones.

In state legislatures where safety belt laws have been debated, the most vocal supporters are crash victims and others who know the lifesaving benefits of safety belts. You have heard many examples today and I'm sure you will hear more. As more states consider belt use legislation, public opinion will continue to mount in favor of safety belt legislation as it did in the child safety seat campaign. Public acceptance will continue to become more widespread.

For those who argue that belts are a "nuisance," "inconvenience," "intrusion," the same could be said of all traffic ordinances.

The Reagan Administration feels strongly that government cannot and should not regulate every aspect of what we do. President Reagan came to Washington to remove as many constraints on the people as possible and prudent. But driving an automobile is a "privilege," not a right. There is no constitutional or God-given right to go through the windshield of your car. The legislatures of this land may condition it with reasonable precautions for the safety of human lives as you have done since the invention of the automobile. Unbelted persons present more than a danger to themselves. They can threaten the lives and safety of others.

Unbelted passengers can interfere with the ability of an operator to respond to the collision, and unbelted drivers may lose control of a vehicle, causing death and injury to others, including those not involved in an initial collision. This scenario is confirmed by crash tests with dummies in all four seats. In frontal collisions, the unbelted dummies in the back seat are thrown forward into the dummies in the front seat. The same is true for side collisions, depending on the angle of impact.

To those who have expressed the hope that state legislatures will fail to act and that "air bags" will be installed in all cars by 1989, I want to say: beware. What they may not realize is that the Secretary's rule does not require air bags. It is an automatic occupant restraint rule. It allows auto manufacturers to select any automatic restraint technology that meets our 30-mile-per-hour protection tests. Automatic safety belts will likely be the most widely used because they are less expensive than airbags. Although automatic belts would result in some increased usage, mandatory use laws, based on foreign experience, should result in even higher usage. We know this is true in America, too, because we have the early results from New York. With its new belt use law, which went into effect January 1, New York has experienced a dramatic increase in belt usage -- from 17 percent to an estimated 70 percent.

Additionally, proponents of air bags fail to tell you that air bags alone only help in frontal collisions. They're are not much good in rollovers, side impacts or rear end collisions.

The facts are irrefutable that simple manual safety belts can begin saving lives now in all kinds of crashes.

To those who have the notion that public opinion is against safety belt use laws, I say wrong again. A national newspaper published a survey earlier this year showing 86 percent of people believe using seat belts would save a significant number of lives; sixty-eight percent would like to see their states adopt belt use laws. Another opinion survey shows seventy percent of New Yorkers favor the new safety belt law. I am convinced this momentum will continue.

To those who say such a law will be ineffective, I say: look at New York. Look at Great Britain. Safety belt usage increased in Great Britain from 40 percent prior to the law to about 95 percent; fatalities have declined 25 percent. About 30 percent of Australians wore safety belts before the law, and 80 percent after the law. Those Canadian provinces that have adopted safety belt laws experienced substantial increases in belt usage.

A law which experience tells us will increase safety belt usage -- and therefore decrease death, injury and costs -- is effective. The success and acceptance of child safety seat laws affirms this point. In essence, the law is designed to educate.

Many points of this issue are disputed by no one. Those who support state use laws and those who oppose them agree that the laws will promote the greater use of safety belts. They also agree that the greater use of safety belts will save lives, reduce injuries and save billions of dollars in health care costs.

Moreover, the American public has already invested billions of dollars in safety belts since they were required to be installed in the sixties, and they are available now in virtually every car on the road.

After analyzing the facts, and dispelling any myths that have gotten in the way of understanding this issue, I am confident you will reach the same conclusion I have reached: Such belt use legislation will promote the health and safety of the people of your state, save money for your taxpayers, and do so in a reasonable and constitutional manner. I urge you to support safety belt use laws.

For the sake of ourselves, our families and our fellow citizens the time has come for America to "buckle up."