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ELIZABETH HANFORD DOLE
PUBLIC MEETING ON AUTOMATIC RESTRAINTS
KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI
DECEMBER 1, 1983

I appreciate your presence at this public hearing on the issue of automatic restraint systems. This has been a matter of personal concern to me. Like many of you, I believe this issue needs to be resolved once and for all, and for the benefit of all concerned -- the public at large, auto buyers and the industry.

In its decision in June of this year, the U.S. Supreme Court mandated this re-examination of the automatic restraint issue. I indicated at that time that we would move promptly in taking the necessary steps to reach an appropriate final decision. For that reason the notice of proposed rulemaking (NPRM) I issued in October sets a stringent timetable for resolving the question of crash protection for the front seat occupants of passenger cars.

We have set December 19th as the closing date for comments. We will then reach a final decision as expeditiously as possible. We hope to publish a final decision document by April 1984. If new issues should require additional time, we will publish the final decision no later than July 1984.

The question of passive or automatic restraints has a long history. It has, however, been two years since the rule was last reviewed. We are here today in a good faith effort to review that rule and to consider information that has become available since then, to update cost, accident and insurance data, and to re-examine the available facts.

In highway safety, there are few -- if any -- decisions more important than the one we will reach through this rulemaking process.

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We want to determine to the best of our ability the steps needed to improve passenger safety, for I have no higher mandate. The startling reality that 92 percent of all transportation fatalities occur on our highways requires us to take every reasonable action to reduce the danger of death and injury from automobile accidents. We are here in America's heartland today to help determine what that best "reasonable action" may be.

While the precise nature of this rulemaking is not limited to a specific number of possibilities, there are three primary alternatives to guide our thinking:

One -- we could reinstate the automatic protection requirements of Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard 208, and set a new compliance date. This would permit the manufacturers to equip their cars with airbags or automatic belts.

Two -- we could amend the standard in any of several ways. We could, for example, specify airbags, or automatic belts that are detachable, or non-detachable belts; or some combination of those options. We might require that cars be produced with an airbag retrofit capability.

Three -- we could rescind the existing rule again, if our analysis justifies that course of action.

These are the principal alternatives. There are, in addition, other options to be considered. For example, there is the possibility of a demonstration program involving a test fleet of perhaps a million cars. We could seek legislation to require manufacturers to offer automatic restraints as options to consumers. Or we might decide on the basis of all evidence at hand to seek incentives for states to enact mandatory state safety belt laws. I am not making suggestions -- simply outlining some of the proposals that have been discussed.

You may be aware that our society sustains 6½ million highway accidents, and an average of 2.3 million injuries and nearly 50,000 fatalities a year. Motor vehicle accidents are the fourth leading cause of all deaths. We must also be mindful of the fact that front-seat motor vehicle fatalities have averaged 24,000 a year for the past three years. That is cause for concern for all of us.

I have come here today to assure you of my earnest commitment to a final decision document as early in 1984 as possible. We want to hear from the auto industry, those who make our cars. We want insurance companies who have closely followed this issue to give us their views on the feasibility of various alternatives. We are anxious to learn from the experiences of government officials and others. Most of all, we seek the views of private citizens, the people literally behind the wheels of our passenger cars day-in and day-out. You know the importance of improved automotive safety.

We will carefully weigh the opinions and expertise of those of you in this room, and across the nation and all those to whom auto safety is so important. So for the first time we are conducting public hearings on this issue outside of Washington. We had a good turnout at the first session, in Los Angeles, earlier this week. I am grateful for the excellent attendance here today, and look forward to hearing your views.

I am determined to open wide the doors of my department so citizens will freely voice their concerns on safety and transportation issues. I am committed to that course. That's why I'm with you today.