

Department of Legislative Services  
Maryland General Assembly  
2008 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE

House Bill 380

(Delegate F. Turner, *et al.*)

Environmental Matters

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Motor Vehicles - Use of Text Messaging Device While Driving - Prohibition

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This bill prohibits a driver from using a text messaging device to write, send, or read a text message while operating a motor vehicle. A violator is guilty of a misdemeanor and subject to a maximum fine of \$500.

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Fiscal Summary

**State Effect:** Minimal general fund revenue increase from the penalty provision applicable to this offense. The increase in the District Court caseload is expected to be minimal and could be handled with existing resources.

**Local Effect:** Enforcement could be handled with existing resources.

**Small Business Effect:** None.

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Analysis

**Current Law:** A wireless communication device means a hand-held or hands-free device used to access a wireless telephone service or a text messaging device. A “text messaging device” is not specifically defined in the Maryland Vehicle Law.

There are no restrictions applicable to adults in the Maryland Vehicle Law governing the use of hand-held telephones or electronic devices while driving. However, except to contact a 911 system in an emergency, a minor holding a learner’s permit or provisional license is prohibited from using a wireless communication device while operating a motor vehicle. This prohibition on novice drivers is only enforceable as a secondary

action. A violator is subject to a maximum fine of \$500. The prepayment penalty assessed by the District Court is \$70, or \$110 if the violation contributes to an accident. A violator is also subject to license suspension for up to 90 days by the Motor Vehicle Administration.

A person is deemed guilty of negligent driving if the person drives in a careless or imprudent manner that endangers property or human life. A negligent driving violation requires the assessment of one point against the driving record and is a misdemeanor subject to a maximum fine of \$500. The fine currently assessed by the District Court for this offense is \$140. If the negligent driving offense contributes to an accident, the fine increases to \$280, and three points are assessed against the driver's license.

**Background:** According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, two states specifically prohibit driving while texting. Washington was the first state to enact such a law in May 2007, and New Jersey enacted a similar provision in November 2007. At least one major city – Phoenix, Arizona – has this prohibition within its city limits. At least four other states have considered this provision.

General restrictions in other states on cell phone use while in a motor vehicle may effectively make driving while texting illegal. California, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Washington, and the District of Columbia prohibit all drivers from using handheld phones while operating motor vehicles. Since texting requires a cell phone to be held in the hand, these laws appear to prohibit that activity. Seventeen states and the District of Columbia prohibit wireless communication device use by younger drivers. Among those states, California and Maine prohibit all drivers younger than 18 from using any type of wireless communication device while driving. The other jurisdictions, including Maryland, prohibit drivers with instructional permits or provisional licenses younger than 18 from using a wireless communication device while operating a motor vehicle.

Experts estimate that the nearly 250 million wireless phone users in the United States sent about 158 billion text messages in calendar 2006. It is unknown how many of these messages were sent while people were operating motor vehicles, but driving while texting does appear to be a growing trend. A study by Nationwide Insurance estimated that 20% of all drivers send or receive text messages. A Zogby poll of drivers between the ages of 18 and 24 revealed that 66% confessed to driving while texting.

While few studies have quantified the distraction caused by texting while driving, and no state has published data showing a link between texting and vehicle accidents, experts have estimated that driver inattention is a factor in 80% of motor vehicle crashes and 65% of near crashes. As a result, driver distraction appears to be a factor in over 4 million accidents, 34,000 fatalities, and 2.1 million injuries. While a number of states

require law enforcement officers to document the use of wireless devices, especially cell phones, at the scene of an accident, the reliability of data gathered at the accident scene has been subject to challenge.

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### **Additional Information**

**Prior Introductions:** None.

**Cross File:** None.

**Information Source(s):** Judiciary (Administrative Office of the Courts), Maryland Department of Transportation, National Conference of State Legislatures, Department of Legislative Services

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