

Department of Legislative Services
2010 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
Revised

House Bill 299 (Delegate Malone)
Environmental Matters

Vehicle Laws - Distracted Driving - Prohibition

This bill establishes the offense of distracted driving. The offense is a misdemeanor, punishable by a maximum fine of \$500. It is not considered a moving violation, however, for the purpose of assessing points. A police officer may only enforce this offense as a secondary action when the driver is detained for another violation of the Maryland Annotated Code.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: Minimal general fund revenue increase from the penalty provision applicable to this offense under the Maryland Vehicle Law. Enforcement can be handled with existing resources.

Local Effect: Enforcement can be handled with existing resources.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Bill Summary: If a person drives a motor vehicle in an inattentive manner, resulting in the unsafe operation of the motor vehicle and the inattention is caused by the person engaging in any “preoccupying activity” that distracts the person’s attention, that person is guilty of distracted driving.

A “preoccupying activity” includes reading or writing; personal grooming; using a wireless communications device; adjusting cargo; eating, drinking, or smoking; physically attending to another passenger; and operating or observing a video display.

Current Law: A “wireless communication device” means a handheld or hands-free device used to access a wireless telephone service or a text messaging device.

There are no specific provisions restricting or prohibiting driving while distracted. However, the State has enacted provisions restricting or prohibiting the use of wireless communication devices. A driver is prohibited from using a text messaging device to write or send a text message while operating a motor vehicle in motion or in the travel portion of the roadway. The prohibition does not apply to the use of a global positioning system or to the use of a text messaging device to contact a 9-1-1 system. (See Transportation Article § 21-1124.1.) Except to contact a 9-1-1 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. A violator is also subject to license suspension for up to 90 days by the Motor Vehicle Administration (MVA). This prohibition on minor drivers is only enforceable as a secondary action when a police officer detains a minor driver for a suspected violation of another provision of the Annotated Code. (See Transportation Article § 21-1124.)

A violator of either of these provisions is guilty of a misdemeanor and subject to a maximum fine of \$500. The prepayment penalty established by the District Court for these offenses is \$70. If the violation contributes to an accident, the prepayment penalty increases to \$110. MVA is required to assess one point against the driver’s license for a violation, or three points if the violation contributes to an accident.

While no State statutory provision specifically prohibits “distracted driving,” 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 prepayment penalty currently assessed by the District Court for this offense is \$140. If the offense contributes to an accident, the prepayment penalty increases to \$280 and three points must be assessed against the driver’s license.

Background: In September 2009 a national summit was convened to discuss the dangers of distracted driving. The summit included participation by federal and state transportation officials, state legislators and other elected officials, law enforcement personnel, and academics. As a starting point, the summit defined “distracted driving” as “Any non-driving activity a person engages in that has the potential to distract him or her from the primary task of driving and increases the risk of crashing.” A determination was made that there are three main types of driving distraction:

- visual – taking your eyes off the road;
- manual – taking your hands off the wheel; and
- cognitive – taking your mind off the primary task of driving.

There was a consensus at the summit that, while all distractions can endanger driver safety, texting while driving is the most alarming because a driver has to engage in all three types of distraction to send and receive text messages.

Traffic safety 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 about 4.9 million accidents, causing 34,000 fatalities and 2.1 million injuries. In 2008, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reported that 5,870 people were killed and 515,000 were injured in crashes involving at least one form of driver distraction. A 2007 Nationwide Mutual Insurance survey of 1,500 drivers reported that more than 80% admitted to changing clothes, steering with a foot, painting nails, and shaving while driving.

One of the most frequently cited studies on the impact of distractions on driving was a 2006 study of real world driver behavior, completed by NHTSA and the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute, which concluded that driver inattention is the leading factor in most crashes and near-crashes. The study tracked drivers of 100 vehicles for more than one year. The vehicles were equipped with video and sensor devices that provided over 42,000 hours of data. During the study, the drivers were involved in 82 crashes, 761 near-crashes, and 8,295 critical incidents. The study concluded that the most common distraction for drivers is cell phone use. Also, the number of crashes and near-crashes resulting from dialing a cell phone was nearly identical to the number resulting from listening or talking. Some distracting behaviors and their risk associated with accidents according to the study follow:

<u>Distracting Driving Behavior</u>	<u>Crash/Near-crash Increase Factor</u>
Reaching for Moving Object	9 times
Looking at External Object	3.7 times
Reading	3 times
Applying Makeup	3 times
Dialing Hand-held Device*	3 times
Talking or Listening on Hand-held Device*	1.3 times

*Although dialing was found to be more dangerous initially than talking or listening, because talking or listening occurs more often and over a longer period of time, the number of accidents caused by talking or listening was similar to the number of accidents caused by dialing alone.

Maine, New Hampshire, and Utah have enacted laws that either generally prohibit distracted driving or prohibit a range of specified behaviors while driving that are defined as distracting. California, Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Washington, and the District of Columbia prohibit all drivers from using handheld phones while operating motor vehicles. Provisions in Connecticut and the District of Columbia that prohibit the use of hand-held phones while operating a motor vehicle also prohibit engaging in distracting activity that may affect the safe operation of a motor vehicle. Restrictions on the placement of televisions or video devices or their prohibition in motor vehicles are the subject of laws in at least 38 states, including Maryland.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: SB 630 of 2009 received an unfavorable report from the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee. Its cross file, HB 564, was heard in the House Environmental Matters Committee but received no further action. A similar bill, HB 1127 of 2007, was heard by the House Environmental Matters Committee but received no further action. Another similar bill, HB 30 of 2006, received an unfavorable report from the House Environmental Matters Committee.

Cross File: None designated; however, SB 294 and its cross file HB 236 are virtually identical.

Information Source(s): Judiciary (Administrative Office of the Courts), Department of State Police, Maryland Department of Transportation, www.distraction.gov – U.S. Department of Transportation, National Conference of State Legislatures, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Governors Highway Safety Association, Virginia Tech Transportation Institute, Nationwide Mutual Insurance, Department of Legislative Services

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