

Temptation to text while driving continues

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BY SUSAN SCHROCK

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ARLINGTON - Behind the wheel, 24-year-old Caleb Amis admits it can be difficult to avoid the temptation of picking up his cell phone to check email, send a text message or post a quick Facebook status update.

"I've actually taken a quiz on my phone online while driving. I got a 100," said Amis, a University of Texas at Arlington student. "I don't remember how I got to school because I don't remember driving."

In an effort to keep motorists focused on the road and not their cellphone, Arlington became the first north Texas city last year to adopt a texting while driving ban. The ordinance makes it a Class C misdemeanor with a \$200 fine for drivers to use their cell phones for anything other than calls.

Since last Thanksgiving, when enforcement began, Arlington police have issued 49 citations to motorists seen manipulating their phones for an extended period of time, department officials said. Far more have received verbal warnings as part of the department's public education campaign.

"Even though only 49 citations have been written so far, there has been a dialogue going on in the community between officers and citizens we believe has led to safer roadways," said Arlington police spokesman Sgt. Christopher Cook. "We applaud our citizens who have made the right choice to put down the telephone and focus on driving."

Strong deterrent

Between May 2010 and May 2011, 824 of the 6,094 wrecks reported in Arlington were caused by distracted drivers, according to city documents. Four percent of the distraction-linked wrecks involved cell phones.

Amis acknowledges that having digital devices at your fingertips while driving is a risky thing.

"It's a temptation. Everybody knows you can have a wreck but nobody thinks they will have a wreck," Amis said.

Arlington motor officer Darrin McMichael said isn't too difficult to spot violators. He's seen drivers weaving into other lanes, looking down into their laps for long periods of time or even holding their cell phones up in front of their faces while behind the wheel.

"I've seen other cars have to take evasive action to avoid collision with another car because the driver was distracted," said McMichael, who added that he and another motorcycle officer had a near miss with a motorist on the Interstate 20 frontage road a few weeks ago.

Even at stop signs and red lights, McMichael said he'll take the opportunity to pull up along side vehicles and tap on drivers' windows to let them know when they are they are violating the ordinance when they are using their cellphone's Internet-based applications.

"They realize when you're able to explain how quickly just sending a quick text message can cause such tragedy. They capture what you are trying to tell them. I think they are able to momentarily picture in their mind what could happen."

Michael Forrest, who is also a UTA student, said he tries to avoid texting behind the wheel for safety reasons but he says the risk of getting a \$200 ticket is a greater deterrent.

"That's a two-week paycheck. I don't that going to the city of Arlington for a text message," said Forrest, 22.

Statewide effort

Beside media reports and meetings with community groups, Arlington police have also worked to educate the public about the ordinance using digital signs in the entertainment district and other high-traffic areas telling drivers: "Don't Text and Drive. In Arlington, it's the law."

"With 6.5 million visitors who come to Arlington each year, it has been important for us to make sure signage is placed in correct locations to remind drivers the city of Arlington has a strong stance when it comes to motorists texting while driving," Cook said. "We want our visitors to be as safe as our citizens."

Austin and San Antonio have similar ordinances and during the last legislative session lawmakers passed a bill banning texting while driving.

But Gov. Rick Perry vetoed that bill, saying that the key to stopping people from texting while driving is "information and education."

"I support measures that make our roads safer for everyone, but House Bill 242 is a government effort to micromanage the behavior of adults," Perry wrote in his decision to veto the ban.

State Rep. Tom Craddick, R-Midland, said he and other lawmakers will continue pushing for a statewide ban during the upcoming session.

"Writing a text or checking your messages is not worth injuring yourself or someone else," Craddick said. "I believe a ban on texting while driving will help save lives."

- This report contains material from the Star-Telegram archives.

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