

OLD CARS AND NEW LAWS

PLUS WHAT'S UP HERE AND THERE



By Larry Becker

Drivers everywhere could see a new tax down the road, paying to refill the Highway Trust Fund, which finances highway maintenance. The Vehicle Traveled Miles Tax, also deemed a fee on the United States Dept. of Transportation website, would charge drivers a specified amount per mile as an alternative or in addition to the Federal gas tax motorists already pay at the pump. The tax has been tested in various parts of the country and is in limited use in Illinois. In 2015, Oregon will set up a mileage collection system for up to 5,000 volunteers, who will be charged 1.5 per mile and receive a gas tax refund. Presently, the Federal tax rate per gallon is 18.4 cents, or \$3.68 per 20 gallon of fuel. A vehicle getting 18 mpg would travel about 360 miles, amounting to \$5.40 per 20 gallons of gas. The VMT tax would likely utilize the black box already installed on newer-model cars. About 64% of 2005 model year vehicles have black boxes and nearly all new vehicles have them today. However, instead of recording data seconds before, during and after an accident, as well as the functionality of the vehicles systems, the black box may also be used to track how many miles the driver log and where they traveled. Manufacturers are required, under federal law, to disclose if a vehicle has a black box and the use of the system in the vehicle. The

disclosure is generally located in the owner's manual and the boxes themselves are typically under the driver's seat, under the center console or in the dash, depending on the vehicles manufacturers. (Does it sound more and more like Big Brother is watching us??) (Information from article by David Dirkes of the Jackson Ledger-Dispatch)

A recent study by David Brown, a professor of computer science at the University of Alabama's Center for Advanced Public Safety, found that in 2012, the six-day period that includes Christmas, had 18% more vehicle crashes than the Thanksgiving period, and 27% more than the period around New Year' Day.

Are you from there? The states with the worst drivers are as follows: #1-Louisiana, #2-South Carolina, #3-Mississippi, #4-Texas, #5-Alabama, #7-Missouri, tied with North Carolina, #9-Montana and #10-North Dakota. The list is from CarInsurance Comparison dot coms list.

Auto safety regulators are pushing for new equipment to protect motorists from their biggest threat: themselves. They're aiming to keep drunken drivers off the road with the help of onboard technology that immobilizes their cars. New vehicles may soon come with systems to help prevent collisions. And engines may not start unless occupants buckle their seat belts.

Many of the state bills that were signed into law earlier in 2013, will go into effect on January 1, 2014.

Not all of the following state bills are laws at this time. They have recently been introduced and are currently under consideration by the respective legislatures.

ALASKA

The Alaska Dept. of Transportation is testing a piece of equipment designed to crush ice on roadways. The Fairbanks Daily News-Miner reports the tool, a Raiko Icebreaker, was used for two weeks on Fairbanks roads and is headed for Anchorage for two weeks of testing. It attaches to the front of a plow truck and crushes ice with rows of metal spikes. Several states are waiting for the test results.

ARIZONA

The Dept. of Transportation is warning about fraudulent Motor Vehicle Division websites. Various websites are conducting fraudulent schemes by falsely advertising motor vehicle services for driver's licenses, IDs, vehicle titles or registration.

ARKANSAS

The Five Rivers Historic Preservation Association will receive \$425,000 in state money to repair and oversee the historic US. 67 bridge over the Black River, which opened in 1934.

CALIFORNIA

Buried under thousands of miles of pavement are 27,000 traffic sensors that are supposed to help troubleshoot daily commuters and long-term maintenance needs on some of the nation's most heavily used and congested roadways. But about 9,000 do not work. The sensors are a key part of the "intelligent transportation" system designed, for example, to detect the congestion that quickly builds before crews can get out and clear an accident. The same system is used in Michigan and several other states. There is not an estimated repair costs to replace the non-working sensors. Many private traffic mapping companies are hired by the states to post on-line traffic maps to help ease congestion. California estimates that it costs the state approx. \$25,000 per year. One of the big companies furnishing the maps is Google. Google also sends the info to CALTRANS so they can update their freeway traffic travel times.

NRG Energy Inc. was required by an unusual legal settlement last year to build an extensive network of electric car chargers throughout California. Just 110 of the 1,040 stations have been built. Under the settlement (NRG co-owned power plants that sold electricity to the state at inflated prices) NRG was suppose to have installed 40 such stations by Dec. 5th. Available to the public, for \$10 they allow vehicles to go about 80 miles after 20 minutes of charging. The settlement also required, by Dec. 5th, 1,000 "Level2" chargers that supply enough electricity for 12 to 24 road miles for each hour of charging. So far, 103 are operational, including 40 at a high-end apartment complex in San Diego.

The “Lexus lane” was born in Orange County nearly two decades ago. Pay a toll and avoid the crushing traffic. The first of the toll lanes offered commuters an easier ride between Orange and Riverside Counties. But in Orange County, the concept may be losing its luster. A \$1.47 billion proposal to add toll lanes to a traffic-clogged 14-mile stretch of the 405 Freeway from Long Beach to Costa Mesa has met with wide opposition from officials and residents in the six cities along the route. Civic leaders fear the plan could be a harbinger of more toll roads to come.

The Los Angeles Police Dept. started a new seat-belt education effort after Inspector General Alex Bustamante found that up to 37% of officers in accidents last year weren’t using seat belts. State laws mandating seat belt use, often exclude the police.

Helmets are required gear only for bicyclists under the age of 18 in California. Riders over 18 are not required to wear helmets. California law stipulates that bicyclists must have a white headlight and a red rear reflector and yellow or white reflectors on their wheels or spokes as well as on their pedals, shoes or ankles.

D.C. – WASHINGTON

New traffic cameras were activated and police issued warnings to drivers through Dec. 29th, WNEW reported. On Dec. 30th drivers were issued tickets for speeding and infractions at stop signs, crosswalks and intersections.

GEORGIA

Georgia’s Dept. of Drivers Services has upgraded security on its public computer system to allow customers to securely print information required under new federal homeland security guidelines.

INDIANA

Indiana’s first liquefied natural gas refueling station has opened, just off Interstate 65 north of Louisville. The state started 2013 with six natural gas stations, Greater Indiana Clean Cities, director, Kellie Walsh, told the Indiana News and Review.

LOUISIANA

Breaux Bridge City officials are trying to raise \$500,000 to \$700,000 to strip and repaint the Bayou Teche drawbridge.

MAINE

A new 300-spot park and ride lot along Interstate 295 in Yarmouth is getting just a handful of cars per day, prompting some people to call it a waste of taxpayer's money.

MASSACHUSETTS

Legislation has been introduced in Massachusetts to establish a pilot program to impose a vehicle mileage user fee. The bill is intended to supplement the gas tax and implement alternative ways to raise transportation revenue for the state. The pilot program would include at least 1,000 drivers of trucks, passenger and commercial vehicles. These drivers would have on-board vehicle-mileage-counting equipment installed on their vehicles that can report the number of miles traveled. Payments would be collected from the participants. As gas tax revenues decrease due to a more fuel-efficient fleet of vehicles, states are looking for new sources of funding for pet projects. (Information courtesy of SEMA.)

MICHIGAN

Legislation has been introduced to require the issuance of two license plates for motor vehicles. Currently, only one is required. Under the legislation, the plates would be attached to the front and rear of the vehicle. The legislation is opposed by SEMA.

NEBRASKA

The end of tolls at the Missouri River Bridge will mean savings for motorists, but the change also brings a loss of part-time work for toll-takers. "Almost everybody's happy except for a few toll-takers that are out of a job," said John Maryott, a member of the Burt County Bridge Commission.

An archway monument and museum that straddles Interstate 80 has been renamed. Known since its opening in 2000 as the Great Platte River Road Archway, the monument is being renamed simply The Archway.

Clean cars? Workers will install sheet metal on a 5-year-old overpass to keep pigeons out and to protect people below.

NEVADA

The sale of special Lake Tahoe license plates has generated \$350,000 to help fund environmental projects around the Sierra area lake.

NEW JERSEY

Tolls will remain the same on the Turnpike and the Golden State Parkway. The Turnpike Authority approved a \$1.63 billion budget and is projecting a 13% increase in toll revenue from an increase in traffic.

Going to the Super Bowl? The New Jersey Transit announced that it will offer a special Super Bowl pass for \$50 for unlimited travel on trains, buses and light rail

NEW YORK

A system is being installed at the exit at the Niagara Expressway to combat wrong-way crashes on the state Thruway. Doppler radar will be used to detect vehicles traveling the wrong way and trigger a flashing LED sign to alert the driver and tell them to pull over and turn around.

OHIO

The Bureau of Motor Vehicles reports that the state's last state run BMV customer service will close by July 1st, and it will rent space for a privately operated registrar several miles down the road. BMV Registrar Mike Rankin said the move is expected to save \$1million.

Some law enforcement contracts across the state set allowable alcohol levels for officers on duty, the Dayton Daily News reports. State Highway Patrol

troopers and the state park police are among those who can't be disciplined for having blood alcohol levels below .04%.

The state will stop using exfiltration (??) trenches on roadsides after Ohio University researchers determined they are prone to clogs.

SEMA is supporting legislation that would amend the state's current law defining historical motor vehicles to permit use of these vehicles on public roads to and from a location where maintenance is performed. Under current Ohio law, a "historical motor vehicle" is any motor vehicle that is more than 25 years old and owned solely as a collector's item and for participation in club activities, exhibitions, tours, parades and similar uses, but not for general transportation. He bill would give Ohio motorists the opportunity to have their historical vehicles serviced or repaired without the threat of being cited by law enforcement for violation of the Motor Vehicle Code.

In a unanimous vote, the Senate Transportation Committee approved legislation that originally required headlights on motor vehicles to display a "white light" without defining the term. A SEMA amendment that was included in the bill now conforms to the legislation to U.S. Dept. of Transportation standards regarding headlamp color, which all headlamps destined for on-road use must comply. Under federal law, it is possible to design a headlamp that can be perceived as having a blue tint but which nevertheless remains within the federal boundaries that define "white."

OREGON

The state must spend \$16.3 million over the next 6 years to improve the security of driver's licenses, or the federal government could refuse to recognize the IDs for boarding a plane.

SOUTH CAROLINA

A new proposal could make Greenville the first city in South Carolina that bans the use of handheld devices while driving, The Greenville News reports.

A 6 mile-long sound barrier wall being erected along an interstate widening project outside Columbia is costing \$26 million, almost a third of the project cost to widen the highway.

SOUTH DAKOTA

The state Transportation Dept. released a travel information app for smart-phones using the iPhone operating system. The 511 app provides the same information as the Transportation Dept's Safe Travel USA website.

UTAH

Buoyed by a major drop in highway fatalities, Utah state transportation officials are spending \$5 million to add more freeway cable median barriers. The Salt Lake Tribune reports Utah Dept. of Transportation officials said fatalities have dropped nearly in half along Interstate 80 in Utah since cable barriers went up in the medians in 2008.

WASHINGTON

The Transportation Dept. and contractors building a highway tunnel under downtown Seattle are trying to find out what blocked their tunnel boring machine. The machine called Bertha ran into something and was shut down about 1,000 feet from the start.

WEST VIRGINIA

Motorists who received tickets for speeding in the city of Ranson had a choice, face a judge or pay a fine by donating to the police department's holiday toy drive. Lt. Todd Lutman told the Journal that anyone cited for speeding in the city had three options, contest the ticket in court, decline to contest it and pay the fine, or buy a toy for an under-privileged child and get the citation dismissed.

WHAT'S UP HERE AND THERE

Jason Bourcier ignored the tolls on Northern Virginia's Dulles Toll Road. Now to cover his unpaid toll fees and penalties, he will be paying a \$150 a month until 2067-when he will be 87 years old. His original tab was \$202,000, but his attorney negotiated down to \$40,000. Toss in

another \$55,000 in interest payments and other fees, and his total is at \$96,498 – all stemming from \$440 in unpaid tolls. Bourcier had a total of 335 violations. Bourcier said that he was unemployed for a while in 2009 and started using the EZ Pass system to avoid paying tolls. The sad thing is that he thinks that he was unfairly treated and should not have been fined so much. (I guess that he thinks it is OK for other drivers to pay tolls!!!)

Great News for us old guys! The city of Thibodaux Louisiana has rejected a measure that would have banned saggy pants in the city. City Council members and city residents debated the measure for more than 45 minutes on Dec. 4th before a 3-2 No vote.

Larry Becker

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