



At the Assembly

Bill relaxes limits on older R.I. drivers

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At the Cranston Senior Center, Frances Rochefort, 70, talks about the pros and cons of a proposal that would require motorists at age 75 to renew their license every two years, rather than five. Currently, two-year licenses begin at age 70.

The Providence Journal Kathy Borchers

CRANSTON — By midmorning yesterday, the parking lot at the Cranston Senior Center was jammed.

The elderly drivers who maneuvered into tight spots were proud to say that they still drive themselves there each day, despite being in their 70s or even their 80s.

But how old is too old to get behind the wheel?

With the baby boomers headed down the road to retirement and the country's population growing steadily grayer, a variety of states have proposed legislation restricting elderly drivers.

Here in Rhode Island, where limitations on older drivers are among the toughest in the nation, the opposite is true. Currently, drivers 70 and older are issued two-year licenses — as opposed to the traditional five-year licenses — and may have to undergo a road test at the discretion of the Division of Motor Vehicles.

A proposed law on its way to the Senate floor would relax that mandate, giving older Rhode Islanders until age 75

before they must renew every two years.

“People are living longer, they’re working longer and they’re healthier,” said bill sponsor Sen. James E. Doyle II, D-Pawtucket.

“Maybe years ago when the age 70 was included in the law, many more people that age were waning in terms of their eyesight and coordination and that made driving more dangerous,” Doyle said. “Today’s a new reality ... I know people over 70 who are as keen and alert as ever.”

The crowd that played bocce out back at the Cranston Senior Center yesterday said age is more a state of mind than an arbitrary number dictated by the state.

“You’re as old as you feel, and nowadays, everyone feels younger,” said Mary Schlageter, 77. “I still drive all the time.” Driving, she said, helps her stay active and offers a sense of independence.

The 70 of today is different than it was even 10 years ago, said Terry Murphy, the center’s executive director. Most Rhode Islanders hitting that age are still working and leading full lives.

“Seventy is the new sixty,” she said.

But Frances Rochefort, 70, who pulled up to the center in her late model sedan a few minutes later, said she believes it’s “not a bad thing to check on us,” every few years.

“I think our reflexes can become slower. And I put myself in that category. I still drive well, but I think we can slow down some and not realize it ourselves. It might not be bad to have a state standard [at 70].”

A study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration showed that a person’s driving abilities actually improve with age 75 when aptitude starts to deteriorate and accidents increase. The study suggests that a 70-year-old driver is significantly safer behind the wheel than a teenager or even a 20- or 30-something.

But accidents involving elderly drivers do happen.

In January, a 72-year-old Newport woman smashed through the entrance of a Cumberland Farms, after she mistakenly hit the gas, not the brakes.

In nearby Massachusetts last fall, a 77-year-old woman killed two people when she crashed her car into Brockton Hospital. Massachusetts does not have a law regarding older drivers, but is considering a bill that would require drivers over 85 to take vision and road tests every five years.

Research by the American Automobile Association shows that while several other states require more frequent renewals for aging drivers as in Rhode Island, more than 30 states — including Florida, home to a disproportionately aging population — have no laws governing older drivers.

In Rhode Island, an eye test is required during the biennial renewal for drivers 70 and older. A road test is not automatically mandated; however, if a DMV clerk (or a physician or family member) expresses concerns about a driver’s ability to safely operate a vehicle, procedures are triggered to review the case and the division’s medical board may require a driving test, according to DMV Assistant Administrator John DiTomasso.

North Kingstown Rep. Kenneth Carter, who turns 75 this fall, said he thinks most elderly drivers are capable of deciding for themselves when it’s no longer safe to get behind the wheel.

But a recent chat on the AARP’s Web site includes testimonials from those who say when the time came for an elderly parent or spouse to give up driving, they had to force them to give up the keys.

Recognizing that seniors who are still on the road may need some guidance about how to change their driving habits, AAA devotes an entire section of its Web site to senior motorists. It includes a feature created in connection with the University of Florida’s National Older Driver Research and Training Center that allows older motorists to test their

driving competency and even offers hints for choosing a new car that's senior friendly, meaning it's equipped with features such as adjustable seat heights, power mirrors and a good turning radius.

Doyle's bill was approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee earlier this week and is expected to go the Senate floor for a full vote in the coming days. A companion bill in the House has not yet been voted out of committee.

The state's Department of Elderly Affairs applauds the legislative efforts, saying it's important to address the issue of elderly transportation before it affects the baby boomers, most of whom have been driving since their teenage years. "Transportation will play a significant role for this active, independent and aging sector of our society," said Director Corinne Calise Russo.

At the Cranston Senior Center yesterday, Schlageter said she's been driving for more than six decades and doesn't envision changing her habits any time soon. Safety on the road is all about being careful, no matter what your age, she said. "You have to have 1,000 eyes. I tell all the kids that."

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