

Our Views: A distraction for too many

Advocate story

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Perhaps acting on the principle that it's best to not pass a law that is almost impossible to enforce, a legislative committee stalled an almost annual drive for a ban on drivers' use of hand-held cellphones.

The backer of the ban, Rep. Mike Huval, R-Breaux Bridge, shelved the bill after much criticism of it in the House Transportation Committee.

Unfortunately, committee members were distracted, typically by odd things that happened to them driving. "A lady hit me reading the newspaper," griped Rep. Terry Brown of Colfax.

Reading while driving, at least text messages, are already banned. But backers of the ban, which has been adopted by some states, had a lot of facts and figures to back up their position.

"The statistics are pretty overwhelming. Anytime a person is manipulating a cellphone in the car, it's double or three times the regular risk of having an accident," said Louis Fey, with the Louisiana Property and Casualty Insurance Commission.

With auto insurance rates so high, reducing the risk of accidents would seem to be a high priority. But members are also in touch with the grass roots, and they know that people are addicted to their cellphones.

Under the Huval bill, use of a hand-held phone would be a secondary offense, ticketed only if stopping a driver for another violation. So its impact at first would be primarily as an exhortation rather than a comprehensive ban.

If Huval was unsuccessful in the committee, he is certainly right out in the real world. An exhortation is surely needed, even if a law is not the way to go.

People who believe themselves to be responsible drivers and solid citizens think nothing of careening down the highway arguing with spouse or children or someone else, driving with one finger on the wheel and about 10 percent of their attention on the highway.

If you or your family qualify for that description, an investment in a hands-free device could be very valuable, although that doesn't entirely remove the distraction.

We aren't going to get to lower insurance rates in Louisiana with the Huval bill, although it might help, unless the mass of drivers behave much more responsibly than they do today. Our body-shop bills — and hospital bills — drive up everybody's costs, and the only comprehensive answer to that squeeze is more common sense than many drivers exhibit behind the wheel.