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# With one voice, House OKs teen driving bill

## State lawmakers say Tribune series inspired reforms

By Ray Long and Ted Gregory, Tribune staff reporters; Tribune staff reporters Carolyn Starks, Kayce Ataiyero and Monique Garcia and freelance reporter Robert Channick contributed to this report

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SPRINGFIELD -- Without a single dissenting vote, the Illinois House on Wednesday sent to the governor one of the nation's toughest sets of teen driving restrictions -- including a tripling of the duration of the learner's permit phase -- in a package experts say should reduce the heartbreaking No. 1 killer of teens.

"This bill is about the safety of 16-year-old drivers everywhere in the state of Illinois," said Rep. John D'Amico (D-Chicago), the House sponsor. He added that the bill "has been long overdue. I think ... we're going to see a lot of states throughout our country duplicate what we've done."

The action comes in response to growing concerns about the seemingly intractable problem of motor vehicle crashes, which take an average of 5,600 teen lives every year in the U.S. The sweeping legislation, championed by Secretary of State Jesse White and inspired by a yearlong Tribune examination, would impose sobering consequences, including prison sentences of up to 12 years for street racing that results in serious injury.

It also would double the length of time for passenger limits on 16- and 17-year-old drivers and extend night driving restrictions on them. Parents would be required to attend certain traffic court hearings with their teen driver. Currently, there are about 300,000 Illinois teens whom the law could affect.

"We're talking about tough love here, and we have to start early on teaching our young people the rules of the road," White said.

But the bill's requirement that public schools provide a full six hours of instructor-supervised street driving for driver education students, is expected to put financial strains on many school districts, which have been using simulators and "driving ranges" as cheaper substitutes for practice on streets.

"I've been a high school principal and had to go to the scene of accidents," said Rep. Roger Eddy (R-Hutsonville). "I understand exactly what we're trying to do, and I support it 100 percent. I just want us to go on the record to put our money where our mouth is and if we're going to require these things of school districts, work to get that funding as well."

White and legislative supporters have said they would ask the legislature for additional funding to cover the new expense of a full six hours of instructor-supervised street driving.

Experts in driving research, parents of teenagers and police commended lawmakers. Reviews among teens were more mixed.

"You've got all the pieces you want to have, and most of those pieces look pretty good," said Rob Foss, director of the Center for the Study of Young Drivers at University of North Carolina's Highway Safety Research Center. "This is not a Mercedes, but it's a pretty good Audi, anyway."

The proposals on night driving and passenger restrictions fall short of ideals set by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

But Foss added that he was "about 95 percent sure that you'll see a drop in crashes among teenagers, especially among 16-year-olds," although it could take about two years to materialize.

Anne McCartt, senior vice president of research at the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, said components that would extend the learner's permit period to nine months and require parents to attend certain traffic court hearings for their teen drivers were welcome additions to state law.

"Illinois is adding some of the elements of graduated driver licensing we think are most important," McCartt said, "and we think they'll make a difference."

Graduated driver licensing is a system in which young drivers steadily shed restrictions as they gain more experience and maintain a safe driving record.

Crystal Lake Police Officer Sean McGrath, founder of an effective safe-driving campaign in his area, and Buffalo Grove Police Sgt. Scott Kristiansen, a traffic-safety expert who focuses on young drivers, noted the benefits of longer learner's permit phase.

"From my standpoint, get them as much experience as you can before you turn them loose on the roadway," Kristiansen said.

The officers said the new measures would give parents additional leverage to enforce responsible driving in their children.

Waiting for her kids in the parking lot of Conant High School in Hoffman Estates, Karen Jackson said she thought tougher restrictions on teen drivers are warranted. She made her son Brian, 17, wait a year to get his driver's license, time he spent riding in the car with her to reassure her that he was ready for the responsibility of driving solo.

Like many parents interviewed, Jackson said she especially liked the tougher rules on passengers in the car. Other parents supported the earlier night driving restrictions and longer learner's permit phase.

"We've all been a teenager," she said. "They ride around with the music on full blast, messing with the radio, talking to their friends. I think the change is good."

Another Conant parent, Pat Marnell said she particularly liked the idea of the night driving restrictions.

"There are a lot of crazies out after midnight," Marnell said. "They are not mature enough to handle the driving. I wish they would make the driving age 18."

The proposed night driving restricts include exceptions for teens traveling to and from work, attending

school or church events or doing errands for their parents.

Some teens were critical of the legislation.

Buffalo Grove High School freshmen Megan Clardy, 15; Dina Wagdy, 14; and Jackie Toton, 15, all of Arlington Heights, protested the new bills, contending that the passenger restriction would cramp their weekend plans.

"It's upsetting," Clardy added. "I don't think they should change it. Most of the accidents are from older kids who are at parties and drinking."

Trey Blickle, 17, a junior at Crystal Lake Central High School, said the proposed measures are "completely necessary."

But he added that the nine-month learner's permit phase would be too long, especially now that Illinois requires teens to drive with parents for 50 hours.

"The curfew thing will likely help" but it won't reduce the number of kids driving late at night, Blickle said, because teens will still break curfew.

A Johns Hopkins University public health study released in July shows that states with far-reaching restrictions on teen drivers experience about a 21 percent decline in fatal crashes involving 16-year-old drivers. And researchers say that as teens experience more adult-supervised driving, they become safer behind the wheel.

The governor's office said it must review the measure before committing to signing it.

"But obviously we are interested in measures that can help protect our young people behind the wheel," said Gerardo Cardenas, Blagojevich spokesman.

If Blagojevich approves the package, most of the measures would take effect Jan. 1. The street-driving requirement for public school driver education would start July 1, 2008.

The ease with which the package passed has re-stoked D'Amico's enthusiasm for moving the minimum age for obtaining a driver's license. He proposed raising the age to 18 in January 2006 and was rejected soundly.

"I think we're going in the right direction with all this," D'Amico said. "A few years from now, if this doesn't have the results we want, we may have to raise the age."

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety's recommends that teen driving laws set the learner's permit age at 16 and prohibit drivers younger than 18 from driving after 9 p.m. Other experts say that 16- and 17-year-old drivers should be blocked from carrying any teenage passengers. Also, even driver education instructors say the existing model of six hours on the road and 30 hours in the classroom is woefully inadequate to teach teens safe driving.

Some say those components still fail to address one of the most critical concerns with teen drivers: Their brains are undergoing a surging and extensive overhaul that makes them more prone to crash a car.

White, who in August created a teen driving task force, largely in response to the Tribune series, said the task force remains intact to continue to examine the issue and make additional recommendations.

He also acknowledged that the current proposals would irk 15- and 16-year-old drivers.

"They may not like me now," White said. "They may not like the legislation, but when they reach the age of 21 and are alive and well, I think they'll love Jesse White and the members of the General Assembly for our initiative."

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A look at Illinois' teen driving laws State lawmakers, at the urging of Secretary of State Jesse White, created and passed the following proposals aimed at making driving safer for teens. White credited the Chicago Tribune's yearlong series on teen driving for focusing attention on the issue.

CURRENT LAW Minimum age for learner's permit: 15 years old PROPOSED CHANGES No change

CURRENT LAW Learner's permit stage: minimum of three months PROPOSED CHANGES  
Longer: minimum of nine months

CURRENT LAW Supervised driving during learner's permit stage: 50 hours, including 10 hours of night driving PROPOSED CHANGES No change CURRENT LAW Night restrictions (under 18): - Sunday-Thursday: 11 p.m. - Friday-Saturday: midnight PROPOSED CHANGES - Sunday-Thursday: 10 p.m. - Friday-Saturday: 11 p.m. - Some exceptions\* CURRENT LAW Intermediate stage: Lasts until driver is 18 years old PROPOSED CHANGES No change CURRENT LAW Passenger restrictions: - For first six months of intermediate license: no more than one teenage passenger, except immediate family - Applies to 16-year-olds PROPOSED CHANGES - Restrictions extended to first 12 months of intermediate driver's license - Passengers can be ticketed for violating law CURRENT LAW Required driving instruction in public schools: Six hours of supervised driving, which can include the use of simulators and "driving ranges" PROPOSED CHANGES Six hours of supervised driving, but only on actual streets (would take effect July 1, 2008)

CURRENT LAW Keeping a clean record: - First violation: Secretary of state sends warning letter to under-18 drivers and parents - Two violations in two-year span: one-month suspension PROPOSED CHANGES Additional requirements: - Teens with learner's permits need clean record for nine months to get intermediate license - Intermediate license holders need clean record for six months to apply for full licensure

CURRENT LAW When teenagers receive traffic violations: - Parents do not have to attend court hearings - Mail-in court supervision, which allows driver to avoid a conviction, is acceptable PROPOSED CHANGES - Parents must attend hearings when 16- and 17-year-olds request court supervision - Drivers under 21 must attend traffic school to get court supervision - No more mail-in supervision

CURRENT LAW Street racing: Not specifically addressed PROPOSED CHANGES New street racing misdemeanor and felony crimes; felony cases punishable by up to 12 years in prison \*Includes being accompanied by a parent; errands for a parent; going to or from work or a school, religious, government

or civic activity

Sources: Secretary of state's office, Illinois General Assembly Chicago Tribune

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IN THE WEB EDITION Read the Tribune special report

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