

It's high time to ban use of cell phones while driving

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COMMENT

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A power outage knocked out the traffic light at a busy downtown intersection, turning it automatically into a four-way stop, and rush-hour traffic was stacking up.

Inching the motorcycle into the intersection, I sensed something moving to my left and braked. A woman yakking on a cell phone blew by me at speed in a huge SUV, missing me by inches. She never looked. She never slowed down.

Until that second, I was ambivalent about people using cell phones while driving. Oh, people need them, I thought. Mostly, it was none of my business. No more. People who drive and talk on cell phones may be the nicest people in the world, but they are, nonetheless, killers -- yeah, killers -- just looking for a place to happen.

They think they are great drivers. Most are not. A University of Utah study concludes only about 2.5 percent of us can simultaneously talk on a cell phone -- even a hands-free phone -- and drive safely. For most, performance suffers. Braking time increases by 20 percent. Following distances increase by nearly a third. "The deterioration in performance was comparable to the impairment seen in drunken drivers," the study's authors conclude.

The study says cell phone- distracted drivers kill at least 2,600 people and injure 330,000 every year in this nation -- and distracted drivers are worse than drunken drivers with blood-alcohol levels above 0.08.

A Virginia Tech Transportation Institute study in 2009 showed that even dialing a cell phone while driving increases the risk of a crash by 2.8 times; talking on a cell phone while driving, 1.3 times; and, reaching for a cell phone, 1.4 times.

Alaska is behind the national curve. At least nine states and Washington, D.C., already bar drivers from using handheld cell phones while behind the wheel. Novice drivers in 28 states -- not including Alaska -- and Washington, D.C., cannot use cell phones while driving.

It is estimated that of the 80 million or so cell phone users in the United States, more than 800,000 of them are texting -- a no-no in Alaska and 30 other states -- or using a handheld cell phone every day to talk while driving. That should terrify us all.

Five Alaska House members are giving the stink eye to cell phone use while driving. The proverbial snowball has a better chance. Using the devices while driving has a huge constituency. The arguments against banning them are legion -- and often silly. It's a government intrusion, proponents claim, or a socialist plot. It's needed for work. Don't punish me for a wreck I have not had, they say. I need to check on the kids. I can talk on the phone and drive. It goes on ad infinitum.

Cathy Munoz, R-Juneau, and Bob Herron, D-Bethel, joined in House Bill 22 to ban cell phone use while driving, but exempt hands-free cell use.

Anchorage Democrat Berta Gardner, in House Bill 128, would ban cell phone use by drivers younger

than 18. A Pew Research study found that 40 percent of teen-agers interviewed said they were in a car when the driver used a cell phone in a way that endangered themselves or others.

Max Gruenberg, D-Anchorage, in House Bill 68, would ban cell use while driving but also exempt hands-free. Anchorage Democrat Mike Doogan, in House Bill 35, would flatly ban all cell phone use while driving.

They are on the right track. Like it or not, driving on our highways is a privilege. The state gets to set the rules. It is not safe to drink and drive -- even though we all know people who can pull it off -- and it is not allowed. It is not safe to drive backwards down the Seward Highway with your lights out at night just because you may think you can -- and it is not allowed. Highway safety rules generally are designed to keep us from killing ourselves or somebody else. They are, for most of us, supposed to help protect us from jerks.

A ban on handheld cell phone use while driving is reasonable while waiting for more research on hands-free phones. Surely, if we need to find out what's for dinner or how the kids are, we can simply pull over or, for now, use a hands-free phone.

You need only feel wind from a speeding SUV in an intersection to get my point.

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