



New Texas driving laws to take effect Sunday

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Texas drivers will be subject to several new laws when they hit the road next Sunday.

The measures — which, like many state laws, take effect on Sept. 1 — cover subjects such as cellphone use around schools, passing a stopped school bus and protecting Texas Department of Transportation work crews.

And officials are touting at least one new law — which increases penalties for serious hit-and-run accidents — as a significant step in making the roadways safer.

“This could help save lives,” said Dallas Deputy Police Chief Gary Tittle. He said police officials across Texas pushed for the new penalties.

The bills took a back seat to the Legislature’s recent battle over transportation funding. But they could have a more direct effect on drivers.

Here’s a look at some of the new measures:

Police across Texas started noticing a small but growing trend: Drivers involved in deadly accidents were fleeing before officers arrived.

One reason: Many of those drivers had been drinking. And the penalty for leaving the scene was less severe than that for intoxication manslaughter.

“It was giving them an incentive to leave,” said Tittle.

That’s been changed. Effective Sunday, the penalty for leaving the scene of an accident involving injury or death is the same as that for intoxication manslaughter: Two to 20 years in prison and a fine of up to \$10,000.

Police hope the tougher penalties will remind drivers that helping the injured in the minutes after an accident can prove critical.

They expect it will have the most impact on cases in which pedestrians are hit by vehicles.

“You’ve already made one mistake,” said Don Baker, an Austin police commander. “But don’t make another.”

Phones near schools

Texas already prohibited cellphone use behind the wheel in active school zones, unless the vehicle is stopped or the driver is using a hands-free device.

Lawmakers extended the ban to all school property, including parking lots and dropoff lanes. Violators face fines of up to \$200.

There are still exceptions for stopped vehicles and hands-free devices. And the law doesn’t apply to emergency calls.

Officials hope the new law will help curb distracted student drivers as well as parents picking up or dropping off kids.

“Anything that focuses people’s attention is a good thing,” said Craig Miller, the Dallas school district police chief.

Passing school buses

Lawmakers increased the fine for passing a school bus when its flashing lights and stop signs are active.

The penalty used to be \$200 to \$1,000. The new range is \$500 to \$1,250.

The bump came after research by the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services showed that many drivers were disregarding rules against passing stopped school buses.

“Our objective has been to point the problem out,” said Bob Riley, the association’s executive director. “And the problem is documentable in a major way.”

In Dallas County, school bus cameras already capture violators who pass illegally. Owners of those cars receive a mailed notice of a \$300 civil fine.

But if a law enforcement officer pulls over a driver for the offense, the higher penalty will apply.

TxDOT vehicles

Drivers have long been accustomed to slowing down or moving over for police cars, fire trucks and ambulances.

That same idea will now apply to Texas Department of Transportation crews. Motorists will have to slow down or move over when approaching TxDOT vehicles that are stopped and flashing blue or amber lights.

“We are very pleased the Legislature recognizes the dangers our employees face each day while working to maintain and build the state’s vast highway network,” Phil Wilson, TxDOT’s executive director, said in a news release.

The new law requires drivers to move out of the lane closest to the TxDOT crew or slow to 20 mph below the speed limit. On roads where the limit is 25 mph or lower, drivers must slow to 5 mph.

Violators can be fined up to \$2,000.

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The last one is bunk. I foresee abuse by TxDOT.

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Headline said these were new laws ... really nothing new about them. They are just extensions or modifications of existing laws.

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These days you have to be a cop or a lawyer to know all the traffic laws and the traffic law details and exceptions.

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You have to be a cop or a lawyer to know:

 - That you shouldn't drive through school zones with a cell phone stuck to your ear?
 - That you shouldn't speed around a bus as children are offloading?
 - That you should come to a complete stop when there's a stop sign at the intersection?