

## **Public Safety...Public Choices**

Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.

-- S. Kierkegaard

I am changing course from our discussion of the state budget this week to discuss an issue that was on the front pages last week: car accidents involving elderly drivers and a call for mandatory road tests for all drivers 85 years old or older in Massachusetts. As in the recent past, a series of high-profile car crashes involving elderly drivers has renewed this debate. Legislative leaders have discussed the need for a “comprehensive bill” to be enacted by the Legislature within the next year.

We all know that advanced age brings changes in the cognitive, visual and motor skills involved in the safe operation of a motor vehicle. The essential question to me, however, is how to address all drivers, regardless of age, who take to the road with diminished capacity. Over the years, the Registry of Motor Vehicle’s Medical Advisory Board has issued standing regulations regarding the licensing of individuals suffering from arthritis, seizures, chronic loss of consciousness, vision impairment, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. The RMV does not, however, have policies that address cognitive impairments, dementia, or progressive degenerative diseases. To choose a specific age at which someone needs to be tested may be less effective than an investment in developing new rules and regulations that identify previously neglected driving safeguards and proposes new standards for Massachusetts drivers.

There is legislation making its way through the House of Representatives that does not target senior drivers, but focuses on the ability to drive safely - regardless of age. This legislation, sponsored by Representative Kay Kahn, requires health care providers to report patients who have been diagnosed with a cognitive or functional impairment that affects the person’s ability to safely operate a motor vehicle. The reports would be confidential and used only to determine a person’s ability to drive. The bill is supported by the Massachusetts Medical Society as well as AARP.

There are rights in conflict here. Elderly citizens have a right to the continued independence that the ability to drive confers; the public has a right to be protected from drivers who are no longer capable as such. I believe that good public policy can and should balance these two rights, ensuring safe roads while avoiding an approach that is rooted in thinly veiled age discrimination.

I look forward to continued discussions on this issue within a legislative committee structure that will carefully assess all potential solutions to the problem and will fight for a policy that recognizes safety first as its first principle. I know that together we can promote

safety, independence and fairness simultaneously. If you would like any further information on this, or any of the other “driver safety” bills, please contact my office.

*Representative Kahn will be coming out to our district in August to address this issue with our seniors and interested members of the community. Look for date and time in this newspaper’s calendar of events.*