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Guest Column:

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New Distracted Driving Law Will Make Ohio Safer

Earlier this month, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine signed Senate Bill 288, which prohibits the use of electronic wireless communication devices (EWCDs) while operating a vehicle. I applaud Gov. DeWine and the Ohio Legislature for taking a necessary stand against a deadly issue for our state: distracted driving.

The new law goes into effect in April. Currently, Ohio is one of only four U.S. states that does not consider use of an EWCD while driving to be a primary offense for adults. That means adults can not be pulled over for using devices but could be cited if pulled over for a different reason. However, it has been a primary offense for teenagers under the age of 18 since 2012.

With this existing stipulation for teenage drivers, we are admitting that distracted driving is a problem. We were just pretending that this temptation disappears with adulthood— despite evidence showing otherwise.

Traffic fatalities in Ohio have been on the rise for years. In fact, 1,068 were recorded in 2018. After steady increases of nearly 10 percent in each successive year, they reached 1,351 in 2021. We cannot deny the use of EWCDs has contributed: 11,910 crashes in 2021 were attributed to distracted driving, up 8.2 percent from 11,006 in 2020.

Public Opinion Strategies recently conducted a poll of 1,000 licensed drivers in Ohio. Their top concern on the roadways, regardless of age, political ideology or region, was distracted driving. More than 50 percent of respondents said they see another driver using handheld phones either “nearly every time they go out” or “most times they go out.” With this, 61 percent of interviewed drivers believed a ban on EWCD use while driving would decrease accidents in Ohio.

Many of our state's roadway crashes and fatalities are preventable. You are always taking a risk when you get behind the wheel; Operating a two-ton motorized vehicle may be an everyday occurrence for many, but that does not make it any less dangerous. Still, there are things that can be done at a legislative level to lessen these risks. SB 288 is an important first step in changing our culture of normalizing distracted driving.

This bill will protect the safety of more than just motorists, too: pedestrians and road construction workers face danger daily at the hands of distracted driving. It is crucial that we all work to make our roads safer for everyone. SB 288 will assist with that effort in April, but until then, remember that any text message, phone call, email or cat video can wait until you are safely in park. Your life and the lives of your fellow Ohioans matter most.

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