

Ohio traffic laws: Here's what changed in 2023 and what could be coming

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Ohio's traffic laws made a pivotal change this year, and some new legislation could call for more change in the new year.

In January, Gov. Mike DeWine signed a new distracted driving law, which went into effect in April. Law enforcement only issued warnings during the law's six-month grace period, but on Oct. 5, law enforcement started issuing penalties for distracted driving.

The penalties for distracted driving include:

- A fine of up to \$150 and two points on your license for the first offense.
- A fine of up to \$250 and three points on your license for a second offense within two years.
- A fine of up to \$500, four points on your license and a 90-day driver's license suspension for a third offense within two years.
- Fines are doubled for those who use cellphones while driving in a work zone.

How many accidents have there been in Ohio?

Overall, road violations have been on the decline since 2021, according to State Highway Patrol Lt. Nathan Dennis. From January 2021 to the beginning of November 2021, there were nearly 10,200 crashes, 10,500 citations and 32 fatal crashes. In the same 2023 time frame, there were 7,400 crashes, 6,800 citations and 22 fatal crashes.

“What we are seeing is that there's been a trend down in the amount of crashes, the number of citations and the number of fatal crashes over the last couple of years,” Dennis said. “We believe that the educational factor in this is working and we hope that it will continue to work.”

In 2024, Dennis wants to ensure that all motorists remind themselves of the dangers of distracted driving and that their focus remains on the roadway.

“We got to remember safety belts moving into 2024,” Dennis said. “Ensuring that people are moving into the new year buckling up, not driving impaired, not driving distracted and following the posted speed limit—those things in

general and just that shared responsibility of roadway safety could potentially lead to a very safe 2024, and that's what we're hoping.”

Looking ahead, there are some pieces of legislation that were introduced this year that could be hitting the roads in 2024. Here’s what you need to know about them:

Ohio could increase penalties for OVIs

Introduced by Reps. Mark Johnson, R-Chillicothe, and Kevin Miller, R-Newark, H.B. 37 increases penalties for operating a vehicle while impaired and aggravated vehicular homicide under specified circumstances.

The legislation is designed to address repeat offenders, Miller said.

“I realized, after speaking with several folks and based on my experience being a state trooper, is we really need to take a look at OVI penalties and things of that nature, and take a look at that and see what can we do to start addressing this behavior earlier in the process,” Miller said.

On top of the introduced legislation, there’s a sub bill that touches on other areas, including fines, ignition interlocks, mandatory OVI plates and look-back periods.

“We're trying to increase the deterrent factor at the lower levels in addition to the penalties for someone that has a prior offense that killed someone,” Miller said.

Failure to change lanes for stationary vehicles could lead to violation

S.B. 178 prohibits failure to change lanes or proceed with caution around a stationary vehicle in distress and was introduced by Sen. Steve Wilson, R-Maineville.

Wilson worked with the Ohio Department of Transportation, Department of Public Safety, State Highway Patrol and AAA and found there’s a tremendous amount of confusion when it comes to what motorists should do when they see a vehicle in distress.

“If you can pull over and you're going the speed limit, just keep going, you're out of the way, but if you can't pull over, then slow down. And people just don't understand what that means,” Wilson said.

A “stationary vehicle in distress” means any disabled vehicle indicating its disability; any vehicle that displays a fusee, flare or other emergency sign; and any vehicle that is displaying flashing emergency lights or hazard lights.

“What this law does is it simplifies things,” Wilson said. “If on the side of the road, there is a vehicle, a tow truck, a fire truck, an ambulance, a police car that is flashing lights, even a car ... that has their emergency flashers on ... pull over or slow down.”

If you kill a parent due to an OVI, you may have to pay to help children

Another piece of legislation would require a felony offender of an OVI-caused aggravated vehicular homicide to pay child maintenance when the victim is a parent, legal guardian or custodian of a minor child and would allow child maintenance to be awarded in a wrongful death action when the offender is deceased.

Rep. Tom Young, R-Washington Township, and Rep. Adam Mathews, R-Lebanon, introduced H.B. 270 and named it the Sam Knisely Family Support Act after Sam Knisely, who died in an accident caused by a drunk driver. Had Knisely not been on the job his family would not have received workers' compensation and wouldn't have received any financial support.

Young said the legislation allows a fight in civil court to go after monies to help support a child's life in addition to what's in the victim funds.

School bus laws could change in Ohio

Legislation sponsored by Rep. Richard Brown, D-Canal Winchester, makes changes to the current law about when you can and cannot pass a school bus. This is the fourth time Brown has introduced this bill and has always been intended to be bipartisan.

Brown first thought of the legislation when he saw a news report in his old district of Whitehall showing a police officer concerned about people passing school buses illegally.

“I started looking at it and found out that it wasn't obviously limited to Whitehall, that this was an issue and a problem that people were experiencing all over the place,” Brown said.

H.B. 140 would increase the current criminal penalties on drivers who illegally pass a stopped school bus and create an escalating penalty for drivers who violate the law more than once within five years of a violation.

“It's just a way to help protect our school kids, whether getting on or off the bus, going to and from school,” Brown said. “It's illuminating a problem that's out there that most people don't think about and don't realize it really is a big problem.”

The bill also creates a statutory standard governing the use of external school bus video cameras and the use of images from the cameras in court proceedings. There's also an educational aspect that would add signage in registrar's offices that shows the rules on when to stop for a school bus.