

Va. Road Safety Bills Become Law

Teen Drivers' Phone Use Cut; Child Restraint Rules Expanded

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Saturday, March 24, 2007; Page B01

Virginia Gov. Timothy M. Kaine signed three traffic safety bills yesterday, including one that makes it illegal for teenagers to use a cellphone while driving and another measure requiring that children younger than 8 be placed in a booster seat while riding in a vehicle.

Kaine (D), who said he is trying to reduce accidents and injuries, also signed a bill that allows local governments to use cameras to catch drivers who run red lights.

"The research indicates this enforcement tool will help increase traffic flow, reduce accidents and save lives," Kaine said in a statement.

The governor has until midnight Monday to complete action on hundreds of bills, including a Republican plan to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on transportation projects.

Also yesterday, Kaine approved a bill that will make it harder for New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg to prove that Virginia gun shops sell weapons illegally. New York has hired investigators to put pressure on several Virginia gun dealers, whom Bloomberg has accused of contributing to crime in his city. The bill, a priority of gun rights advocates, puts restrictions on private investigators who want to gather intelligence on a gun dealer's methods.

A spokesman for Bloomberg (R) said last night that the mayor was outraged. "Virginia is the top source of illegal guns used in crimes committed in New York City. Just this week, two individuals were arrested by the NYPD for trafficking 83 guns purchased from Virginia dealers. New York City is the safest big city in America, and it didn't get that way by being passive. We will continue to develop innovative and aggressive ways to protect New Yorkers."

Starting July 1, Virginia drivers ages 15, 16 and 17 will not be able to talk, send text messages or snap photos with a phone while driving on Virginia roads. The ban, designed to reduce accidents, also will apply to hands-free devices but will allow teens to use a phone during an emergency.

Virginia will join the District, Maryland and 11 other states that bar teens from using a phone while driving. But like Virginia's seat-belt law, the teenage cellphone ban will be

considered a secondary offense, so an officer could cite a teenage driver only if he or she were pulled over for another moving violation.

The red-light camera program will replace an experiment that expired in 2005 in Alexandria, Fairfax City, Falls Church, Vienna, Virginia Beach and Arlington and Fairfax counties.

The General Assembly, dominated by conservatives who view the cameras as an invasion of privacy, twice failed to reauthorize the program. But a coalition of Democrats and Republicans who represent suburban areas joined to approve the legislation this year.

Under the bill, counties and cities will be allowed to set up one red-light camera for every 10,000 residents.

The booster seat legislation, which takes effect immediately, requires that children be restrained until they are 8. Under current law, children have to ride in a booster seat until they are 5.

Kaine also signed the bills aimed at clarifying the state's gun laws. One requires that only law enforcement officers or someone under an officer's supervision can try to persuade a gun dealer to make an illegal sale.

Bloomberg has been sending private investigators into Virginia gun stores to try to make illegal buys. The process involves "straw purchases," in which one person legally fills out a form and buys a gun for someone else. Bloomberg, who also sent investigators to other Southern states, filed suit against several Virginia dealers.

"The idea of setting people up to make a false firearm sale just strikes me as very, very wrong," said Del. L. Scott Lingamfelter (R-Prince William), the bill's sponsor. "This law says unless you are a Virginia or federal law enforcement official, you don't come into Virginia to set someone up to fail."

The governor also signed several bills designed to encourage residents to live healthier lifestyles. One of the measures directs state agencies to develop ways to combat childhood obesity.

But Kaine has yet to decide about another health-related bill, which would require restaurants to post a sign at the front door if they allow smoking. Kaine has said he might want to amend the bill into an outright ban on smoking in restaurants. But Virginia law designates bars and restaurants as the same type of establishment.

The House of Delegates has indicated that it would be hesitant to ban smoking in bars. Kaine is trying to decide whether he can write an amendment that bans smoking in eating sections but not the areas where mostly alcohol is served. "The governor is still keeping his options open," said Kevin Hall, the governor's spokesman.

