

Hands off: Cellphone driving ban approved

Law passes unanimously, crackdown set for fall

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Ontario motorists will likely have until fall before it becomes illegal to use hand-held cellphones and other electronic devices like BlackBerrys and global positioning systems while at the wheel.

The Legislature unanimously passed the government's law against "distracted driving" yesterday but it will take several months before associated regulations are drawn up and a public education campaign launched, said Transportation Minister Jim Bradley.

Fines will be up to \$500, which drivers can avoid by using a cellphone headset and voice dialing.

While some cab companies, courier and trucking firms want exemptions from the law as regulations are being written, Bradley said they won't be granted easily. "We would be extremely reluctant as a government to grant any exemptions unless a very compelling case could be made. Safety for the driving public ... will be paramount."

The government is looking at exemptions for communications devices for dispatching, tracking and monitoring commercial drivers.

Emergency services vehicles are also exempt from the prohibition on talking, texting and emailing using hand-held devices. As well, calls by motorists to 911 are exempt.

Progressive Conservative leadership candidate Christine Elliott said businesses will have to change their equipment so drivers can be hands-free of electronic devices.

"Anything that can reduce accidents on our roadways is going to be good," she said.

Bradley said the new law will help police crack down on unsafe practices like texting while at the wheel because officers are now reluctant to use careless driving laws, which carry more "significant" penalties of \$1,000 fines and six demerit points, or dangerous driving laws, with a maximum \$2,000 fine and up to five years in jail.

It will also be illegal for drivers to use hand-held entertainment devices but using an MP3 player plugged into a vehicle's sound system is okay. GPS units are acceptable if mounted on the dashboard.

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