

# State tickets 542 for texting

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The Florida Highway Patrol is encouraging local law enforcement to participate in a slow rollout of a new law that prohibits texting while driving. FHP Chief Mark Brown briefed the House Transportation Infrastructure Committee Wednesday on enforcement of the ban which went into effect July 1.

"We've encouraged them to write warnings until December 31st," said Brown. "January 1, we will say do what you would normally do. We did the same thing with seat belts, as well. Give them a chance to get in tune with the law and hopefully they will voluntarily comply."

HB 107, the Wireless Communication while Driving Act, makes it a non-criminal violation to use a wireless communication device while operating a motor vehicle. Brown brought along a map that pinpointed with dots where the more than 900 warnings and citations have been issued so far. It outlines the Interstate highway system with clusters of dots in the Tampa, Orlando and Miami areas and traces I-10 from Jacksonville to Pensacola.

"We watch their driving patterns ... and when we feel we have enough to make a stop, we pull them over. Explain why we stopped them. Listen to anything they have to say and at that point make a decision if we have enough for a warning or a citation," said Brown.

Between July 1 and Tuesday (Sept. 17) FHP has issued 438 warnings for violations but statewide, 542 tickets have

been written by all law enforcement agencies through September 11.

Offenders can avoid a \$30 fine if they elect to participate in a communications device driving safety program. In October, phase two of the law will become effective. It levies a \$60 fine for texting while driving in a school zone or where work on the roadway is being performed.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, more than nine people are killed in motor vehicle accidents blamed on distracted drivers. In 2017, the total was 3,166 with most of the accidents involved a cell phone as the distraction.

The FHP has partnered with the Florida Department of Transportation, the state's sheriffs and police chiefs and AAA Auto Club in a public information awareness campaign about the new law. FDOT has chipped in \$400,000 for billboards, and radio, and digital audio and video ads.

Lawmakers will consider two more driving safety bills during the 2020 legislative session. Sen. Keith Perry, R-Gainesville, wants to require children up to the age of 6 to be placed in a federally-approved child restraint safety seat. The current age limit is 5.

And Rep. Emily Slosberg, D-Palm Beach, has filed a bill to require all passengers in a motor vehicle to be restrained with a seat belt. The 2009 mandatory seat belt law requires just front seat passengers and those under the age of 18 to buckle up.

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