

The Ahwatukee Foothill News
June 23, 2008 - 5:07PM
By Ben Sandoval

New drivers will have one more hurdle to clear before they acquire a license that opens the way to \$4 a gallon gasoline and freedom.

On July 1, Arizona's Teenage Driver Safety Act goes into effect, reshaping the teen driving world by restricting driving until age 18 before awarding a standard license.

The major changes are meant to cut down on the number of passengers young drivers carry and ensure they aren't driving past midnight.

Mountain Pointe High School senior Paul Simmons, 17, believes this legislation could have a positive impact on the community.

Simmons said he's gotten rides from several teen drivers at night, and thinks the curfew could help keep them safe.

"They're not that good (at night driving)," Simmons said.

At the same time, he didn't want to be constrained by too many rules, and didn't think that having multiple passengers in the car distracted drivers significantly.

"It's a good idea and everything, but it's not something that every kid wants," Simmons said.

His friend, Connor Thesz, 16, plans on getting his license in a month or so when he gets a car, and isn't too happy about the new law.

"When you get a permit, that's when you should have restrictions," Thesz said.

And although Thesz disliked the restrictions, he admitted the restrictions could have some merit.

"It's a good idea if it prevents crashes," he said.

Data suggests that the new restrictions will decrease crashes among teen drivers.

Several teen driving statistics presented to the Legislature by a group of parties, including AAA Arizona, prompted them to approve the act.

According to AAA, research shows that the crash risk for teenage drivers with three or more passengers is about four times greater than it is for teenagers driving solo.

Also, other states who restrict teen driving hours report crash reductions of up to 60 percent during those hours.

Rep. John McComish (R-Ahwatukee Foothills), who sponsored the act, said the statistics were overwhelming.

"That was the driving force behind the act," McComish said, adding that it may take a couple of years to get results, but he fully expects to see them similar to those garnered by the 45 other states with intermediate teen-driver programs.

The only thing left is to make sure everyone knows about the new law.

Linda Gorman, public affairs manager for AAA Arizona, said that according to a recent AAA Arizona online poll, 95 percent of 364 respondents weren't familiar with the new law.

"I think it's very important ... because it's going to change the parameters under which they can get their license," Gorman said.

Currently, new drivers can get their permits when they turn 15 years and 7 months, practice for 25 hours with a licensed driver of at least 18 years old, and can get a graduated license at age 16.

Although Arizona has had graduated licenses since 1999, the Teenage Driver Safety Act installs significant change in the licensing process:

- Teens will be eligible to receive their instructional permits at 15 years and six months of age.
- New drivers will have to hold their instructional permits for six months before applying for a graduated license.
- Before applying for a graduated license, drivers will need to have 10 hours of night driving and 30 hours of instructed driving total.
- Drivers with instructional permits must be accompanied by a licensed driver of at least 21 years old.
- Drivers under 18 will hold a restricted graduated license for six months between holding a permit and an unrestricted license.
- Teens cannot drive between midnight and 5 a.m., unless accompanied by a licensed parent.
- Driving to or from a sanctioned school sponsored activity or religious activity, work or a family emergency are all considered exceptions to the curfew.

Graduated licensees are also not allowed to have more than one passenger under 18 years old, unless accompanied by a parent or the passengers are the driver's siblings.

Enforcing the law may not be so straightforward.

Harold Sanders, spokesman for the Arizona Department of Public Safety, said DPS officers aren't being instructed to pull drivers over based on their perceived age or driver's license status.

"The Graduated Driver License legislation was not intended, according to our interpretation, for an agency to arbitrarily stop teen drivers on visual identification alone strictly on the precept they may fall into the GDL requirements," Sanders said, adding that DPS officers will only enforce the legislation after a traffic stop for moving or non-moving violations.

Those who are found to be in violation of the restrictions will be subject to fines and an increase in the amount of time they have to hold a graduated license.

For more information on the Teenage Driver Safety Act and other things associated with becoming a new driver, families can visit www.aaaaz.com.