

Lake County, schools set to restart drivers ed

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TAVARES

Lake County public schools stopped offering drivers education years ago. But it's likely coming back to at least some campuses within the next few months.

The county and the school district are teaming up to offer behind-the-wheel training for teenagers -- Florida's most dangerous drivers, statistics show. The school district's community-education program, which offers courses such as dog-obedience training and drivers education to the general public, would coordinate the new classes.

The program charges nearly \$400 a person for its drivers course. But starting in late December or early January, about 125 teens may get to sign up for free under a proposal the School Board will discuss Monday, officials said.

The program would grow to serve at least 250 students by next fall, said Billie Birdsong, the school district's director of career, adult and community education.

"Our goal is to make the highways and streets safe for everyone, including the students," she said.

County commissioners will vote Dec. 2 on whether to spend about \$125,000 to pay for the first 125 students, a county official said.

The new program for high-school students will be more expensive than the one currently offered to the general public because it would include an additional course -- collision-avoidance training. Also, the district would have to use twice as many cars and travel countywide to bring vehicles to the students.

Organizers are still working out the details, so they don't know yet whether classes would be offered at all public high schools or a few centrally located campuses. But all high-school students -- public, private and home-schooled -- could participate.

Allison Thall, a county official working with Birdsong, said the program would help prevent crashes.

It may better prepare kids than the previous high-school classes -- some of which didn't offer a driving component, district officials said.

"This provides an opportunity for students to have the actual driving experience," said Thall, the county's director of citizens-support services.

Teens have a high accident rate, according to the state Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles. Of Florida's 820,687 licensed drivers age 15 to 19, more than 36,000 had accidents while driving last year. Of those, 418 were fatal.

Educators acknowledge it's important for teens to master tricky maneuvers such as merging onto a highway and navigating busy parking lots. But drivers education is expensive to offer because, in addition to providing a

teacher, a school must pay for vehicles and their maintenance, insurance and fuel.

By 2002, only Umatilla High offered drivers ed.

Leesburg High tried to reintroduce the course last year, but students weren't interested in taking classes during the day, a district official said. They preferred other electives.

The new program may be offered after school and on weekends, Birdsong said. Kids would be required to do 10 hours of driving with an instructor plus spend another 10 hours as a passenger observing other students.

Thall said the county would pay for the project using money from a special fund earmarked for such initiatives.

In 2002, the state Legislature allowed counties to put aside \$5 from each traffic ticket for programs designed to improve teen driving.

Currently, the county has about \$700,000 in its Slosberg fund, named after former state Rep. Irving Slosberg, D-Boca Raton, whose daughter was killed in 1996 while riding in another teenager's car.