

The Martha's Vineyard Times

ISLAND PLAN

CHARTING THE FUTURE OF THE VINEYARD

Driver's education program approved as elective in high school curriculum

By Janet Hefler - June 7, 2007

Plans to add driver's education as an elective in the regional high's school curriculum next fall got a green light Monday night from the school committee.

The Martha's Vineyard Regional High School (MVRHS) school committee unanimously approved a proposal from principal Margaret (Peg) Regan to add a driver's education teacher position starting next September, provided the high school's operating fiscal year 2008 (FY08) budget is passed.

Ms. Regan said a full-time driver's education instructor could teach five classes a semester, about 180 to 200 students, which would cover the entire sophomore class, plus any upperclassmen who had not had the opportunity to take it.

"At this point, we have no budget, so we can't post the position and hire someone until we do," said James Weiss, superintendent of schools.



Barbara and Tom Furino, at right, the founders of M.V. Drive for Life, met at a recent conference with C. Alan and LuGina Brown, who created "Joshua's Law" to fund driver's education in Georgia in memory of

their son, who died in a car accident.

In response to questions about funding the position from school committee member Jeffrey "Skipper" Manter, Ms. Regan said the instructor's salary will be covered through an unfilled full-time teaching position already in the budget, once it is in place. She does not know yet what the salary range will be. The School Council will reevaluate the position next fall, she said, and if it is continued, it would be added as a line item in the FY09 budget.

The program will cost the school very little, Ms. Regan said. In addition to classroom instruction, she explained, students will receive training on driving simulators and computers.

The biggest expenses are for the computer software and simulators. Tom and Barbara Furino and the organization they founded, M.V. Drive for Life, raised enough money to purchase two simulators, one of which is already in the school.

Students will have to arrange for driving instruction in a car from private instructors, Ms. Regan said. At present, Joe and Natalie Thibodeau operate the only driver's education program for Island teens, Vineyard Auto School, which provides both classroom and driving instruction.



After falling asleep at the wheel, Billy Sanfilippo woke up in the mangled wreckage of his truck, pictured behind him on during Public Safety Day in Oak Bluffs. He walked away unscathed because he was wearing a seat belt, a habit he attributes to the "Buckle Up for David and Kevin" campaign. Photo by Ralph Stewart

Ms. Regan said she and the Furinos have been talking about the idea of adding driver's education as an elective over the past school year. Students, however, were the ones who really convinced her of the need for enhanced driver's education as an elective, she said. After the Furinos held an assembly program about driver's education last December, many students came forward, some who had been driving a year or two, and told her they wanted more time and training.

"The big thing is providing this program in school gives kids that extra time - we have the facility, the technology, and we'd like to have the instructor," Ms. Regan said.

The Furinos' passion for improving driver's education for teenagers stemmed from the tragedy of their son David and his best friend Kevin Johnson who died in a car crash on Atlantic Avenue near South Beach three years ago. M.V. Drive for Life's mission includes putting technologically advanced driver's education back into the classroom, ultimately in all Massachusetts high schools, and making it available to every teen.

To accomplish their goals, the Furinos and M.V. Drive for Life have been fund-raising by seeking grants and private donations. The organization already raised funds to purchase one driving simulator, which is in the high school in a room off the school cafeteria, and will soon purchase a second.



Maggie Lindland experiences the jarring impact of a simulated car crash at 5 to 10 mph aboard the Seat Belt Convincer at Public Safety Day in Oak Bluffs. Photo by Ralph Stewart

At Monday night's meeting, Mr. Furino told the school committee, "We need to arm our children with the technology." That includes ensuring that Island teens receive the best, most up-to-date driver's education, he said.

("Responsible Driving," the driver's instruction manual in use on the Island, was originally published in 1947 by the American Automobile Association. Although the manual states it is updated annually, the last copyright date is 1997.)

Citing some sobering statistics, Mr. Furino noted that 1 out of 77 children born today will die in a car accident, and 70 out of 100 children born today will be injured in a car accident. Driver's education is a life skill that should be taught in the classroom, he said. Teens learning to drive on Martha's Vineyard have little experience in highway driving, Mr. Furino pointed out. Ms. Regan agreed. "For some students, the first time they drive on Route 128 is when they drive off to college," she said.

Enhanced driver's education can offer practice in highway driving through simulators, which provide realistic driving scenarios under varying weather, lighting, and road conditions, Mr. Furino said. Students also receive an analysis of their performance, which targets their weak areas.

Offering driver's education during school hours provides an opportunity for students who otherwise would not be able to take it because of scheduling conflicts due to extracurricular activities.

In addition to classroom instruction, Ms. Regan said, another goal for the program is that students will attend Skidz School, an advanced driver's course that includes defensive driving techniques, offered by the National Safety Council's Central Massachusetts Chapter in West Boylston.

In December 2006, the Furinos held an introductory event and sign-up night to arrange for up to 200 students to attend Skidz School in West Boylston on June 21. Completing a course such as Skidz School provides an added bonus, knocking 10 hours off required parent-supervised driving hours required under the new teenage driving law passed this year.

In addition to raising money for simulators, the Furinos and M.V. Drive for Life board member Peter Rosbeck donated the money and purchased a Seatbelt Convincer for the high school in February.

Last Saturday at Public Safety Day in Oak Bluffs, Mr. Furino and M.V. Drive for Life committee member Cole Powers gave demonstrations of the device, which simulates the impact of a 5- to 10-mph car crash while wearing a seat belt.

The best seat belt convincer of all, however, proved to be Billy Sanfilippo, age 20, whose mangled truck rested on top of a flat bed truck decorated with a "Buckle up for David and Kevin" sign.

After being awake for 26 hours for his job at the Oak Bluffs Highway Department painting road and light posts, Mr. Sanfilippo fell asleep while driving home on Barnes Road at 4 am on May 26.

He woke up to find the airbag deflating, and his 2007 GMC Sierra, with only 2,000 miles and two payments made on it, a heap of twisted metal and glass against a tree. He suffered only a few bruises.

The truck's speedometer was stuck at 60 mph. "You don't hit trees at 60 miles per hour and survive unless you're wearing a seatbelt," he said. Losing his close friends David and Kevin made a lasting impression on him, Mr. Sanfilippo said. "The bumper stickers with their names on them are more than a slogan - it's a way to live."

On Friday at the Oak Bluffs Library, the Furinos will meet with Senator Robert O'Leary, who has agreed to work with M.V. Drive for Life and the Massachusetts Safety Council towards creating "David's Law." Based on a Georgia law named for Joshua Brown, also the victim of a fatal car crash, "David's Law" would fund driver's education for every Massachusetts teenager through a five percent surcharge on traffic violation fees.

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