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Big telecom won't make call to dissuade texting, driving

By Jim Messer
MY VIEW

Cell phones have changed our world, becoming as common as the home telephone and, in many instances, replacing the home phone. An estimated 88 percent of all Americans, 266 million, are now cell phone subscribers.

But cell phones aren't just for talking. Texting — sending, receiving and reading text messages from a cellular device — has exploded in popularity. According to the CTIA-The Wireless Association, more than 600.5 billion text messages were sent in America in 2007. By June 2008 the rate had increased to 75 billion per month.

Texting has overtaken voice in mobile-phone usage. Unbelievable? The next time you drop your child off at school, look at all of cell phones. Watch all the kids looking down at their phones while entering text with both thumbs. And it isn't just kids. Watch the business people downtown, or at the airport, send and receive e-mails and texts.

Of course the time to text is not when driving a car. It is certainly not when operating a commuter train. And now we learn the engineer of the commuter train in California was texting just before the crash that claimed 25 lives and injured 135 more.

Here is a bold statement: No one should operate any moving vehicle while texting. We know that 80 percent of crashes, and 65 percent of near-crashes, involve driver inattention within three seconds of the event.

Maybe the statement isn't so bold. Nationwide, 89 percent of adults support a ban on texting while driving and five state legislatures have passed laws specifically outlawing texting while driving.

Florida should too.

But don't tell that to the telecommunications industry. Last year's attempt to pass a bill outlawing texting while driving in Florida was opposed, and eventually killed, by big telecom.

Why would the telecom industry kill a law designed to protect citizens while admitting that no one should text while driving? We all already know the reason: profit. Worldwide, texting produces revenues of more than \$100 billion per year. Any attempt to limit texting, even while operating a moving vehicle, reduces big telecom's big profits. Sadly, the results were predictable.

Texting drivers have killed or injured pedestrians, other motorists and themselves. But big telecom tells us that there is already too much regulation. Big telecom claims a more comprehensive law is needed to solve the problem — and then offers nothing but a roadblock to reasonable legislation.

Big telecom sounds a lot like big Wall Street. Do we all wait for big telecom to do the right thing? Do we wait for more people to die — or do we demand that our legislators protect us now?

Warn your family and friends and tell your legislators — Leon County will have two new state representatives after Nov. 4 — to support laws that will protect all of us. It is their obligation to pass laws that make our roads safer. It is our obligation as citizens to demand them.

