

Washington State Patrol Media Release

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Distracted Drivers Are a Safety Hazard on King County Highways

During Wednesday morning's commute an off duty trooper observed an erratically driven BMW passenger car in the northbound lanes of SR-167 in Auburn. The off duty trooper reported the vehicle as he was certain the driver was impaired as he was watching him for over 3 miles drift in and out of his lane, driving on the shoulder, and at times taking up 2 lanes of travel. It turned out that the driver hadn't had a drop of alcohol, but instead was reading the daily newspaper while driving to his destination. The 53 year-old Puyallup resident was issued a \$550 negligent driving infraction for his actions and disregard for the safety of the motoring public.

In June of 2009, a concerned citizen called 9-1-1 to report a possible D.U.I. driver traveling on SR-164 in King County. During the 9-1-1 call the reporting party describes how the vehicle was swerving over the center line, the fog line, and nearly hitting concrete jersey barriers while it was fluctuating speeds. Air and ground troopers coordinated a response and stopped the vehicle in Enumclaw. During the contact it was determined that the driver wasn't impaired but rather texting on her cell phone. **(Video of 9-1-1 call available upon request)**

These are just 2 examples of many distracted driving cases that occur on King County highways every day. Talking on the cell phone and texting while driving continues to be the most observed driver distraction. A recent Virginia Tech study indicated that drivers who text while driving heavy vehicles or trucks are 23.2 percent more likely to cause a collision than non distracted drivers. In a separate study conducted in 2006, psychologists from the University of Utah concluded that "motorists who talk on handheld or hands-free cellular phones are as impaired as drunken drivers."

According to the September 2009 edition of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's Traffic Safety Facts, in 2008, 5,870 people lost their lives and an estimated 515,000 people were injured in police-reported crashes in which at least one form of driver distraction was reported on the crash report. While these numbers are alarming, NHTSA recognizes that distracted driving is highly under reported and that these statistics do not accurately indicate how big of a problem distracted driving really is.

Currently Washington State law prohibits texting while driving and talking with the cell phone to your ear, and is punishable by a \$124 infraction. Other driver distractions are taken on a case by case basis and may be punishable by a \$550 fine for negligent driving.

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