

## Text stops: they'd save many lives

CURRENTLY, THE ONLY MEASURE the Ontario government plans to combat distracted driving is a huge increase in penalties including \$1,000 fines and three demerit points that will mean some drivers' loss of their licences.

In light of the fact that distractive driving has overtaken drunk driving as the top cause of traffic fatalities in the province, with 78 last year alone, the need for strong measures is undeniable.

However, even the current penalty for any form of distracted driving, a \$280 fine, has apparently had minimal impact, with recent surveys showing that roughly half young drivers admit to the most serious form, texting while driving.

Just how deadly that practice can be was demonstrated only last week when friends of a Mono man who died in a head-on collision with a gravel truck on Highway 10 suggested that the most logical reason his car crossed into the truck's path was that he had been texting at the time.

In our view, a successful attack on this problem must involve a lot more than higher and higher penalties, and a good starting point would be for the Ontario government to provide a viable alternative to the deadly practice.

That's the approach taken in New York State, where last fall. In a bid to persuade drivers to resist checking their phone whenever it beeps or pings or whatever sound it makes when a message arrives, the state has introduced so-called 'Texting Zones' along its major highways and thruways.

In announcing the initiative, Governor Andrew Cuomo said an initial 298 signs with messages like 'It can wait, Text Stop 5 miles?', would be installed on the state's busiest roads, pointing drivers to 91 texting locations.

In that state, the zones cost nothing to build, since they actually already existed in the form of rest stops and parking areas.

New York State is continuing to use every tool at its disposal to combat texting-while-driving, the governor said in a release announcing the initiative. In addition to tougher penalties, new detection methods for state police and ongoing public outreach efforts, we are now launching special Texting Zones to allow motorists to pull over and use their phones.

With this new effort, we are sending a clear message to drivers that there is no excuse to take your hands off the wheel and eyes off the road, because your text can wait until the next Texting Zone.

As we see it, the appropriate approach in Ontario should involve creation of thousands of what the Brits call 'laybies' - designated paved areas beside a main road where cars can stop temporarily. Here, unlike Britain, highway rights-of-way are wide enough to accommodate wide shoulders, but unlike other North American jurisdictions, the shoulders here are invariably rough gravel.

Although obviously the ideal situation would be to pave the shoulders of all main highways, it would be a great improvement to have asphalt added to 200-metre sections every five or so kilometres, with New York-style TEXT STOP signs posted perhaps 500 metres ahead of each one.

Of course, that's not all we see as needed. Creation of these safe alternatives to texting on the run should be accompanied by an educational campaign aimed particularly at younger drivers who think they can somehow manage to text without being distracted.

As well, the legislation should restrict the imposition of demerit points for distracted driving to drivers caught texting.

As we see it, there's a world of difference between the amount of distraction involved in on-the-go texting and simply answering an unexpected call on your cell phone and letting the caller know you're on the road and to keep it short. In such cases of 'minor distraction,' police should have the option of alleging an offence that carries a fine but no demerit points.