

From the Office of the Sheriff:

The recent state budget now allows for law enforcement officers to conduct traffic stops for those not wearing a seat belt. The failure to wear your seat belt has become a “primary” enforcement stop. Prior to the change, this was not the case and officers needed to observe additional traffic violations before they pulled you over. So how will things change?

I think the change is a good one. It will provide more federal \$\$ to the state and the county. I have also written before that I have parked near our community high school and watched the endless line of students leave the parking lot without their seat belt on. I was helpless then, but now have a new tool in my traffic safety tool box, the ability to stop and ask for compliance. This is our goal, voluntary compliance with the law, not citations.

In Dodge County we have a less than 70% compliance rate. I am very confident that this will increase significantly under the new law. The fine has remained the same, just ten bucks. I still talk to people who proudly say “I would rather pay the ten bucks that buckle up!” Your choice! But understand the odds of you being inconvenienced by one of our deputies has now significantly increased. I do not necessarily see a major increase in citations. As I stated earlier, our goal is voluntary compliance, not revenue production.

We also still hear from those who say that they spoke to a friend, who talked to a friend, who had a friend that was in a crash and would have died if he had been buckled up. OK, got it! As a veteran of some where around 200 traffic fatalities, I can talk to maybe one or two where that argument would have some minor validity. What many do not understand is that seat belts and air bags are not life savers, not a sure means of not being killed. However, when properly used, they will greatly enhance your ability to live or suffer less severe injuries.

Seat belts also retain you in your seated position. As a driver you will never remain in control of the brakes or accelerator if you are flying into the passenger seat or being ejected. Many other people are injured by the driver or passenger being thrown within the vehicle - post-crash, striking one another. I have also heard numerous times that “I don’t need to wear a seat belt because I am a good driver.” Great! What about wearing it because of all the bad drivers? We have heard all the excuses, heard all the stories, our position remains the same, seat belts save lives!

The new law also has some folks up in arms that this will increase the number of OWI arrests. I do not see that at all. Most of our impaired drivers occur during hours of darkness and it is difficult to confirm use of safety belts. I would say that if you are driving impaired and were pulled over for not wearing your seat belt and arrested for OWI, you will get no sympathy from me. There will always be drivers driving drunk, it is for that reason alone that all of us should buckle up.

The bottom line is that all of us are exposed to higher insurance rates because of the actions of others. Increased fatalities and more serious injuries lead to higher claims. I have been to dozens of crashes, head on and rollover, which the occupants were able to stand by me and provide a written statement of the crash. Should you ever be in a crash, I hope you are one of them rather than laying on a gurney on the way to a hospital or worse yet, in the back of the Medical Examiners van. Buckle up, thanks for listening, tnehls@co.dodge.wi.us