

MADD begins new crusade in Austin

Group lobbies for stricter laws, open container ban in vehicles, alcohol tests

AUSTIN (AP) — Fresh from last session's victories, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) reignited its legislative crusade Tuesday to fight alcohol-related crashes in Texas.

Members spent the day at the Capitol, lobbying lawmakers to ban open containers in vehicles, make it easier to revoke drivers licenses and require alcohol tests for all drivers in serious crashes.

"It seems like this time we sort of got some momentum from last session," said Bill Lewis, MADD's public policy liaison. The group's chief victory last session came when lawmakers agreed to lower the blood alcohol concentration level from .10 to .08.

"None of these bills increase the punishment for drunk driving," Lewis said. "What we're really interested in is stopping crashes before they happen."

Roughly 100 MADD members from El Paso to East Texas scurried from office to office talking up their proposals to lawmakers.

Some members said they got the feeling drunk driving will not be the legislative priority it was last session. The spotlight is being occupied by such issues as tight budget concerns, children's Medicaid, clogged highways and prison salaries.

But drunken driving should be a priority until

it is no longer a problem in Texas," said Karroll Searcy, a MADD member from Irving.

"So many people are still dying on the roads in Texas," she said. "It's still a major issue. As long as our numbers are leading the nation, then that's way too many."

In 1999, Texas had 1,734 alcohol-related traf-

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fic fatalities, compared to California's 1,351, according to statistics provided by MADD.

At the top of MADD's agenda are the open container bills sponsored by Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound.

Nelson's bills would make open containers illegal anywhere inside vehicles on public roads.

Under current law nicknamed the "Adam's Apple Law" by officers, a driver cannot be charged with an open container offense unless he or she is seen consuming its contents.

"It's ludicrous," Lewis said. "It's just a shame that trees had to give their lives so that a law as stupid as the one we have now could be printed."

Nelson's repeat offender legislation calls for an automatic, one-year drivers license suspension on the second drunken driving conviction.

A bill by Rep. Steve Wolens, D-Dallas, increases drivers license suspension periods for drivers who failed or refused to take a breath test. It also allows police officers to take away licenses immediately from drivers arrested for DWI. Officers usually give licenses back to drivers, who may or may not choose to relinquish the license at a formal hearing within 40 days of the arrest, Lewis said.

As long as the drunken driver has a plastic license in hand, "the suspension only occurs in a DPS computer," Lewis said.

A bill by Rep. Terry Keel, R-Austin, would require all drivers involved in crashes causing death or serious bodily injury to take tests to check their blood-alcohol levels. Texas law requires tests only in crashes resulting in death.

Two killed in airplane accident

PAMPA (AP) — A married couple were killed early Tuesday when their plane crashed near the Perry LeFors Airport in the Texas Panhandle.

The wreckage of the single-engine 1971 Bellanca was found less than one mile east of the runway shortly after 1 a.m., *The Pampa News* reported.

The victims were identified as Pampa residents Don Harrison, 56, and his wife, Terry, 51. Pampa is about four miles from the airport.

"As the aircraft was attempting to land at the airport in heavy fog, the pilot apparently lost his bearings and crashed into a muddy plowed field," said Department of Public Safety spokesman Tom Vinger. "Apparently, he was unable to attain visible sighting of the airport."

Gray County Sheriff's Department Chief Deputy David Russell said his department was called after an emergency signal from the plane was detected.

Airport manager Ron Uhrh said he watched the couple leave Monday.

The couple is believed to have traveled to Albuquerque so Don Harrison could visit the Veterans Affairs hospital there.

Houston mayor postpones same-sex benefits proposal

HOUSTON (AP) — Mayor Lee Brown has put a proposal to offer benefits to same-sex partners of Houston city workers on the back burner in favor of drafting an ordinance to ban discrimination of gays and lesbians.

City Councilwoman Annise Parker said the ordinance would first guarantee that workers cannot lose their jobs because of their sexual orientation.

The council had been scheduled to consider the benefits proposal on Wednesday but withdrew it on Monday.

"We still live in an era when gays and lesbians in most states can be fired just for being gay," Parker said in the *Houston Chronicle* on Tuesday.

"This is a proper precursor to extending insurance coverage to domestic partners so that city employees will be protected against discrimination when they access insurance coverage," Parker said.

Brown said in a statement that the ordinance will assure gay and lesbian city employees that their jobs will not be in jeopardy if they seek benefits for same-sex partners in the future.

In 1985, City Council approved an anti-discrimination measure for gay and lesbian employees, but it was later overturned by voters. City voters can force a referendum on an ordinance with 20,000 valid signatures on a petition.

Brown issued an order banning discrimination against gays and lesbians shortly after he took office in 1998.

Councilman Rob Todd filed a lawsuit claiming that the mayor could not issue an order contradicting the election results, and another election must be held to adopt such a policy.

The Texas Supreme Court is set to rule in October on Todd's lawsuit.

"I'm not opposed to the idea of nondiscrimination policies, but I am certainly opposed to City Hall running over something that the voters have already done," Todd said.

Some council members, including Councilman Mark Ellis, have said they are concerned that offering same-sex benefits would result in fraud and high cost.

Seven of the nation's 10 largest cities offer same-sex benefits. The remaining three are Houston, Dallas and San Antonio.

Linda Seyda, director of human resources for the city of Philadelphia, told the *Chronicle* that Philadelphia has had no problems with cost or fraud since first offering same-sex benefits in 1998. "Since we've instituted, it's been so quiet that I haven't opened this file," she said.

Thirty-three of Philadelphia's 25,000 employees use same-sex benefits, Seyda said. Philadelphia officials — like those in Houston — thought about 100 employees would seek benefits for same-sex partners at an annual cost of \$200,000.

She also said Philadelphia requires employees to prove financial interdependence and register as same-sex partners when seeking the benefits. So far, no cases of fraud have turned up, Seyda said.

Mike Barbour, who has studied domestic-partner benefits for Towers Perrin, an international consulting firm based in New York, said entities see low usage of same-sex benefits because most domestic partners have coverage elsewhere.

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Tuesday, February 13
Titus (with MSC Film Society)
Introduction by Dr. Douglas Brooks
7:00 p.m.
MSC Forsyth Center Galleries

Wednesday, February 14
Early Music
6:00 p.m.
MSC Forsyth Center Galleries

Shakespeare in Love
(with MSC Film Society)
Introduction by Dr. Douglas Brooks
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Cushing Library Tour
2:00 p.m.
Cushing Library Lobby

Sonnet Lecture and Open Mic with Dr. Douglas Brooks
7:00 p.m.
MSC Forsyth Center Galleries

Friday, February 16
Lecture with Gordon McMullan
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4:00 p.m.
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