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

Members spent the day at the Capitol, lobbying awmakers to ban open containers in vehicles, nake 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 monentum 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.

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Some members said they got the feeling drunken 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

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

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

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

MADD's public policy liaison

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.

it is no longer a problem in Texas," said Karroll 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

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## Two killed Houston mayor postpones in airplane same-sex benefits proposal HOUSTON (AP) — Mayor Lee Brown has put a pro-

era when gays and

lesbians in most

states can be fired

Houston city councilwoman

- Annise Parker

just for being gay."

accident city workers on the back burner in favor of drafting an orcouple 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 Uhruh said he watched the couple leave

traveled to Albuquerque so Don Harrison could visit the Veterans Affairs hospital there.

posal to offer benefits to same-sex partners of Houston

dinance 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.

Monday. "We still live in an era when gays We still live in an 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 cover-

age," 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

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 The Texas Supreme Court is set to rule in October on

"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,"

Some council members, including Councilman The council had been scheduled to consider the Mark Ellis, have said they are concerned that offering benefits proposal on Wednesday but withdrew it on 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

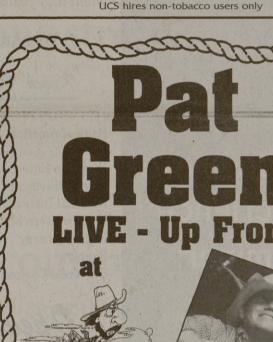
Linda Seyda, director of human resources for the city of Philadelphia, told the Chronicle that Philadelphia has had no problems with cost or fraud since first offering same-sex benefits in 1998.

"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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