

GUEST / OPINION

Seat-belt law will save lives and money

By MIKE COONEY

If you knew that there was a way for Montanans to save \$44 million a year wouldn't you jump at the chance? Saving even half that would be a great thing for all of us.

And \$44 million is the amount the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates Montanans would save if we pass Senate Bill 43, a primary seat belt law.

NHTSA also estimates that 25 lives would be saved annually and 183 serious nonfatal injuries would be prevented each year.

In crashes where people are killed or injured, we the people make sure that emergency personnel are sent to the site.

We the people provide care to those injured, and we deal with the aftermath of a deadly crash. We transport survivors to the nearest medical facility.

Whether or not the crash victims have insurance, we care for their medical needs. In many crashes where seat belts are not in use the passengers many times sustain head and spinal cord injuries. We take care of them.

We read about the deaths but

we seldom hear about those who have serious lifelong injuries.

Some of these crash victims will need assisted care for the rest of their lives. Some will need further medical care for years. Some will not be able to continue to work. Some will become wards of the state.



Cooney

I have read many letters, e-mails and guest columns in several publications discussing SB43, the "primary seat belt" bill.

Some suggest that the Legislature is just looking for new ways to harass the public and increase revenues through fines. As the main sponsor of this legislation, let me set the record straight.

Some opponents say, "Forcing me to wear a seat belt is trampling on my rights." There is no constitutional right to drive. Driving is a privilege. We have many laws governing our driving and if you don't follow those you may lose that privilege.

Other opponents say, "It is my

right not to wear a seat belt and if I kill myself that is my business." Unfortunately, crashes in which people are killed have a tremendous cost both human and societal. The human costs are evident but let me address the cost to society.

According to the National Safety Council a fatal crash is estimated to cost more than \$1 million. The costs include wage and productivity losses, medical expenses, administrative expenses, motor vehicle damage and uninsured employer costs.

Seat belts don't guarantee you will survive every crash or that you will always walk away from a crash unscathed. But the evidence is indisputable: People stand a much better chance of surviving a crash and preventing serious lifelong injury when seat belts are properly used.

I've not addressed the human cost but all one has to do is listen to doctors who have to deal with family and friends of those who die after being thrown through a windshield and crushed by their car.

Talk to a family who has lost a loved one who might have been saved had they worn a seat belt. Talk to families who are

caring for loved ones who can no longer care for themselves. Better yet, talk to a person who was saved by the seat belt.

The human cost is real, tragic and preventable.

If this bill passes and is signed into law, law enforcement will spend one year giving warning tickets in an effort to educate the public. The current fine of \$20 will remain in effect. Those with a physical disability who cannot use a seat belt and have a note from their doctor are exempt. This approach, like this bill, makes good sense.

I hope you will ask yourself, "Do we have the right to pass a law that saves Montanans money and preserve the health and welfare of its citizens?"

Help by letting your legislator know that you support saving lives on our roadways and you support saving millions of our hard earned dollars.

Mike Cooney is a Democratic state senator representing District 40 in the Helena area, and is former secretary of state.

Editor's note: SB43 has passed the Senate and is scheduled for hearing in the House Judiciary Committee at 8 a.m. Friday.