

DRIVERS

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prominent part of that story.

Closer to home, an elderly couple from out of state died after the driver lost control of his Buick and ran into a pond along U.S. Highway 192 in Osceola County last March.

Other stories of seniors driving into store-fronts or causing pile-ups on highways make for quick-hit headlines and television sound bites.

But the reality is, licensed seniors driving in Florida are far less likely to be involved in crashes — both fatal and nonfatal — than their youngest counterparts sharing the road.

Seniors ages 70 to 74 had fewer than 100 crashes, including fatal and nonfatal crashes, per 10,000 licensed drivers. And those 90 or older had fewer than 82 crashes for every 10,000 licensed drivers, according to the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles.

The age group with the highest crash rate was 15 to 19. Drivers 20 to 24 years old, meanwhile, had the highest rate of fatal wrecks.

The rates are likely influenced both by driver inexperience and volume. There are many more younger drivers than there are seniors with licenses in the state — roughly 650,000 more drivers younger than 30 than those 65 or older. And seniors drive less.

But state license counts still show Florida has more than 3.7 million drivers age 61 and older.

Locally, Central Florida is heavily populated with senior drivers. In Lake and Marion counties, where there are large retirement communities, at least a third of all county drivers are age 61 or older, according to the most recent state licensed driver statistics.

Nearly 7,000 drivers age 91 or older have licenses in Brevard, Lake, Orange, Osceola, Seminole and Volusia counties alone, the stats show.

Dave Westberry, communications director for the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, said although the state has roughly 60,626 licensed drivers who are 91 or older — close to the number of 15-year-old Floridians with learners licenses — those oldest drivers are “not necessarily behind the wheel.”

Report: Dementia a concern

The Florida At-Risk Driver Advisory Council in 2004 generated a report titled, “The Effects of Aging on Driving.” The document cited statistics that at least 20 percent of the then 242,480 Florida drivers age 85 or older were “considered dementia drivers with a mild to moderate condition.”

“Every person will face a progressive decline in functional ability as they age, the report concluded. “Correctly identifying at-risk drivers and providing remediation are key safety issues.”

It called for a better system of assessing seniors’ abilities and improvements in transportation alternatives.

But Dr. Ken Brummel-Smith, with the Florida State University College of Medicine, who chaired the council, said some of the most comprehensive recommendations were not implemented.

He said Florida still needs to find ways to approach senior driving problems “from a medical standpoint” and with a “rehabilitative approach not taken right now.”

He said it sometimes seems that decisions about whether a senior is qualified to drive have a lot to do with pre-conceived notions. Florida needs an objective method to provide a qualified assessment, Brummel-Smith said.

“Ageism,” he said, “is not based in reality.”

Senior advocates say older drivers often are unfairly criticized for driving too slow, for failing to signal or for not obeying traffic signs.

“Most seniors monitor themselves,” said Yoli Buss, the director of Driver Improvement Programs for AAA Auto Club South in Tampa. “They want to be on the road as long as possible as long as they’re safe to them-



RICARDO RAMÍREZ BUXEDA/ORLANDO SENTINEL Eddie Feliciano (left) of Road Ready Watchdog Driving School hands over the keys to father-in-law Manfred Lude for a drive recently. Feliciano often coaches older drivers.

selves and others on the road.”

Many decide to stop driving at night, to keep to the right lanes and to avoid busy left-hand turns at intersections with no turn arrows, she said. Others stop driving altogether when they realize their skills have diminished significantly.

The independence that driving affords many seniors is difficult for many to go without.

Buss said it’s often up to up to friends and family members to observe changes in the way their parents and grandparents are driving and confront them at the right time. She did it with her father.

“I had to tell my dad, ‘Dad, you’re not safe anymore driving at age 87,’” Buss said. “I was amazed my father said he was going to stop immediately.”

Resources available

Resources for seniors who drive and their family members are available at AAASeniors.com and AAASeniors.org. Florida’s Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles also has valuable information at www.floridagrاندriver.com. That’s where seniors and family members can learn more about evaluating driving fitness and refresher courses, among other things.

The AAA reports that while seniors drive less frequently, the “collision rate per mile driven rises steadily for drivers 65 and older.” That group, according to AAA, has “more collisions per mile driven than any other age group except teenagers.”

AARP.org also provides good information for senior drivers and their loved ones.

When drivers reach 80 years of age, Florida requires them to pass a vision test to keep their drivers license. Other seniors may also be asked to take a “re-test” if law enforcement or family or friends report concerns about their abilities to Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, Westberry said.

That’s what happened to Cope, 88. Cope said he did everything the state asked of him when they wanted him re-tested.

“I’d rather be dead than not be able to drive,” said Cope, a retired mechanical engineer. “I’ve always been a defensive driver. I just think I’m a pretty good driver. I must be, or I wouldn’t have my license.”

Not all seniors will maintain the skills needed to drive on Central Florida’s busy, congested and fast-paced roads.

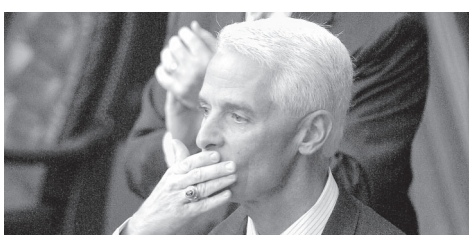
Feliciano said he can tell the signs of someone who is no longer capable of driving safely. Some signs are constantly drifting into other lanes, failing to signal well before a turn is made, constant abrupt braking and traveling much slower than the posted speed limit.

“I know right away if it’s time to hang up the driving,” he said. “Some of them can’t accept, ‘No you can’t drive anymore,’ but that’s the reality of it.”

With folks such as Cope, who can drive, Feliciano offers coaching and strategies to rid them of bad habits. He also helps them deal with slower reactions that come with age.

“Basically, I’m teaching them how to drive properly,” Feliciano said.

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STEVE CANNON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS Gov. Charlie Crist throws a kiss after finishing his last State of the State speech.

Still, despite the traditional opening day vows of bipartisanship, almost everyone expects a tension-filled spring in Tallahassee. The 2010 election season is the busiest in Florida political history — with every Cabinet seat up for grabs and a host of lawmakers from both parties climbing over each other for higher office. Crist is the first governor not to seek re-election since a 1968 change to the state constitution allowing two terms.

On policy, Crist cited his proposal for a revenue-sharing blackjack deal with the Seminole tribe as an example of the need for compromise. He said he’s not a “big fan” of gambling but noted that the Seminoles are running casinos and the state is getting nothing in return.

The same practical thinking also is true for the stimulus, said Crist, who asked, “Isn’t it our duty to advocate for Florida to receive its fair share? Isn’t that more helpful to Floridians than engaging in hollow ideological posturing that achieves nothing?”

House Majority Leader Adam Hasner, R-Boca Raton, said the governor’s support of the stimulus undercut Republicans who were offering alternatives. “The fact that he was out there supporting it made it pretty much a done deal.”

In contrast, Sen. Alex Villalobos, R-Miami, said it was “courageous” for a governor facing declining poll numbers in the primary battle to defend the stimulus. “There wasn’t a person in that room who didn’t take stimulus money back to their districts,” he said.

Aaron Deslatta of the Tallahassee bureau contributed to this story.

National parks let the guns come in

Law reverses 94-year policy of Park Service

By Julie Cart TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

LOS ANGELES — A federal law that took effect Monday may alter the checklist for some Americans as they pack to visit their national parks: insect repellent, snacks, hiking boots ... shotgun.

Visitors now can have a firearm in any national park from Gates of the Arctic to Everglades provided they comply with the firearms laws of the park’s home state, according to the law that was passed as an amendment to credit card legislation.

In some instances they may carry concealed and loaded firearms at campsites in Yosemite Valley, along trails at Yellowstone and standing at the rim of the Grand Canyon.

Gun advocates welcomed the law as overdue, noting that firearms are allowed in national forests and other federal lands, many of which are adjacent to national parks.

But opponents say guns do not belong in the parks, where it remains illegal to fire a weapon or kill an animal, and where employees, including most rangers, are unarmed.

The presence of guns, they say, could increase the chance of deadly accidents

“Now it’s a big sea of gun freedom.”

— Mike Stollenwerk, gun rights advocate

or confrontations between park visitors.

The law, passed by Congress in May, reverses 94 years of National Park Service policy that generally allowed visitors only to transport unloaded, disassembled weapons in the trunks of their cars.

You still won’t be able to discharge a firearm except in extreme cases, and weapons will not be allowed in buildings where federal employees work, such as park visitors centers.

But restaurants, hotels and gift shops will be subject to the new gun law.

Bill Wade, chairman of the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees and a former park superintendent, said the changes will be nuanced. “I don’t expect that there’s going to be hordes of people going into parks ... with rifles slung over their shoulders.”

Mike Stollenwerk, co-founder of OpenCarry.org, which advocates legally carrying holstered handguns in public places, said the law opens 85 million acres of the country where gun owners say they have felt unwelcome.

“Now it’s a big sea of gun freedom,” Stollenwerk said. “The idea is that the same rule that applies on Main Street will apply to the national park.”

Critics, however, say there are many potential complications.

David Barna, a National Park Service spokesman, said it is the responsibility of gun owners to understand laws of the state in which they are visiting.

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LEGISLATURE

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Rubio, who has surged ahead in the polls by painting himself as a purer conservative voice than Crist.

With the state facing a \$3.2 billion budget shortfall, Crist’s 45-minute monologue was light on details but defended political compromise and consensus against what he called “hecklers in the cheap seats where conviction abounds, but wisdom is not required.”

Crist bemoaned “extremists” and said, “Problem-solvers recognize that important achievements often require consensus, and consensus sometimes requires concession.”

In one striking moment, Crist defended the \$787 billion federal stimulus package and his decision to campaign for its passage. While Republicans sat in silence, Democrats leapt to their feet to applaud the governor.

“I commend you for your maturity and responsibility” in taking the stimulus money, Crist said.

Florida’s 160 legislators returned to Tallahassee earlier in the day to the usual trappings, flowers on their desks and lobbyists in pressed suits crowding the hallways.

Republican legislative leaders pledged to reduce the size of state government, with an agenda that should cheer tea party advocates. Plans include cutting permitting and regulation, combining two watchdog agencies that audit government operations, and even stripping state workers of their Black-Berrys.

Crist said he also believes “government should be smaller, not larger” — even though the governor’s proposed 2011 state budget would grow state spending by \$3 billion.

Crist and lawmakers wasted little time setting a pro-business agenda for the 2010 session. Within hours of the session’s opening, both chambers passed a bill that will delay a massive tax increase on businesses that would have taken effect in April because of a deficit in the state’s unemployment trust fund. Crist signed the bill into law 10 minutes before his speech.

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