

Safe at any speed?

By Nicholas Iovino

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Motorists driving 70 miles per hour on some major highways could soon find themselves in line with state law, if Massachusetts legislators approve a new bill aimed at raising the speed limit.

The proposed legislation would boost the maximum speed to 70 mph on parts of I-95, I-91 and the Mass. Turnpike — wherever the posted limit is currently 65 mph.

The Bay State's speed-limit bill was first proposed by Rep. Dan Winslow in September 2013, shortly before he resigned from office to take a job in the private sector. Despite his absence, Winslow's bill now sits in the Legislature's Joint Committee on Transportation.

State Rep. Shawn Dooley, R-Norfolk, who won a special election on Jan. 7 to assume Winslow's seat, voiced more skepticism than enthusiasm toward his predecessor's proposal.

"I know a lot of states have done this, but these are states with much less density and high-density roads than what we see on the Mass. Pike and other highways," Dooley said.

Fixing the MBTA's finances, fighting proposals to raise the gas tax and reducing or eliminating highway tolls are all issues Dooley says take primacy over raising the speed limit.

"It's not a priority," said Dooley. "All of these things, for me, take priority over changing the speed limit."

Still, Dooley said he would reserve final judgment until after he sits down with the Massachusetts Chiefs of Police Association (MCPA) and other public safety advocates and officials.

By raising the speed limit, Massachusetts would join 34 other states that have lifted their maximum speeds to 70 mph or higher on some part of their roads since 1995.

Setting speed limits was traditionally deemed a state duty, except for the period between 1973 and 1994, when the federal government placed mandatory speed limit caps on interstate highways.

"Since the repeal of the 55-mile-per-hour maximum speed limit, we've seen most states have raised their highway speed limits," said John Bowman, spokesman for the National Motorists Association (NMA). "Sixty-five is sort of the lower end of the range now."

The NMA is a 9,000-member grassroots organization that advocates for several highway policy issues, including establishing speed limit zones based on the speed at which most people drive in a given zone.

Pros and cons

AAA Southern New England opposes the potential speed limit boost, maintaining speed is directly related to motor vehicle collisions.

"Speed and higher speeds are a factor in many motor vehicle crashes, so we would have very strong concerns about this bill," said Massachusetts AAA spokesman Mary Maguire. "We typically would oppose an increase to the speed limit because of the fact that many fatalities on the roadway are associated with high speed."

Although safety is AAA's chief concern, fuel efficiency is second on the list.

"If you keep your speed at 60 miles per hour or lower, your vehicle is far more fuel efficient," said Maguire. "If you increase the speed limit, generally your vehicle is going to be far less fuel efficient."

Maguire could not confirm whether more collisions occur at speeds of 70 mph and above, but she did caution that cars driving at faster speeds take a longer time to stop.

"The faster you're going, the more time it takes you to brake and stop, and the less able you are to react to a deer running across the road, or a child running across the road, or a ball [rolling] out from behind a vehicle followed by a child," said Maguire. "So we have some concerns related to the fact that there's no doubt that increased speed makes it far more difficult to brake or to stop if you need to."

For those reasons, AAA Southern New England feels "we're safer when we keep our speed controlled."

One person in favor of raising the maximum legal speed is Ivan Sever, a longtime Massachusetts resident and activist member of the NMA for the last 20 years.

"The state maximum speed limit is set by the Legislatures," said Sever. "That's just an arbitrary number. They pick a speed. It's not based on anything."

Sever argues the legal speed limit should be based on the average speed 85 percent of people drive on a particular stretch of road, as determined by a traffic engineering study.

If that were the case, he added, speed limits in some parts of Massachusetts would be set well over 70 mph.

"If you drive from Massachusetts into New Hampshire, nothing has changed," said Sever. "Your car is the same; the road is the same. It's just an imaginary line where suddenly it becomes safer to go 5 miles per hour faster."

Sever said he does not expect any safety issues to arise from boosting the speed limit, because people are already driving at speeds of 70 mph and faster.

"It won't change the way people drive," he said. "There will just be less criminals out there... It became a source of revenue, and that's unfortunate. We're still told it's about safety, and it's not."

Frequency and severity of crashes?

On the opposite side of the spectrum is the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), which cautions states not to raise speed limits without careful consideration for the consequences. "Raising speed limits gets people to their destinations faster, but we have to recognize that it doesn't come without a cost, and the cost is more serious crashes and deaths on those roads," said IIHS spokesman Russ Rader.

The IIHS is a nonprofit advocacy organization funded by the auto insurance industry, which has an interest in reducing the number of speed-related crashes.

When the insurance industry and federal government crash test vehicles for safety, those tests are typically performed at speeds of 35 to 40 mph, Rader said.

"When you get people traveling at double that speed, it makes it more difficult for drivers to have enough time in an emergency to brake and bring the speed down to a survivable level," he said.

More than 10,000 people died in speed-related crashes in 2012, according to the IIHS.

The IIHS cites a 2009 study from the American Journal of Public Health as evidence that higher speed limits led to a 9 percent increase in fatalities on rural interstates between 1995 and 2005. At the same time, the NMA contends higher speed limits do not play as large a role in collisions, pointing to a 1999 study that observed 66,000 fewer road injuries in 1997, compared to 1995, a year before most states raised their speed limits.

"In the 33 states that raised their speed limits through the first half of 1996, total fatalities were up just 0.4 percent, the same increase as for the nation as a whole," Stephen Moore wrote in a 1999 Cato Institute study, titled "Speed Doesn't Kill: The Repeal of the 55-MPH speed limit." The Massachusetts Police Chiefs Association has not yet taken an official stance on the speed limit proposal, said Executive Director Wayne Sampson, because the group has not been

provided with a copy of the bill.

"I'm going to assume that this bill only raises [the speed limit] on the interstate highway system and not on any of our residential streets, so, you know, it would not appear to be an alarming increase in the rate of speed at the present time," Sampson said.

Sampson said an increased speed limit does not necessarily mean there would be a rise in crashes.

"The speed alone seldom ever is the direct cause of an accident. It's usually some other event," he said.

Driving under the influence and distracted driving are two major contributors, he added. Other common causes of vehicle crashes include changing lanes, not paying attention to other vehicles and poor road conditions.

Although speed is not generally the sole cause of a crash, it does intensify its severity.

"What we are concerned about relative to speed, is that excessive speed can increase the extent of the injuries in accident cases, and that always has to be taken into consideration," Sampson said.

He confirmed many highway travelers already drive around 70 mph, as it is common to operate over the speed limit.

"If you look at any of our interstate highways in the present time, clearly the majority of vehicles are exceeding that speed limit of 65 [mph] on a daily basis," said Sampson. "And part of the criteria that highway specialists use is the average speed that vehicles can travel on a particular roadway. So the 70 [mph] does not appear to be an unreasonable rate for what the majority of vehicles are safely traveling at the current time."

In 2011, Maine raised its speed limit to 75 mph on part of I-95 near the Canadian border. Last year, New Hampshire approved boosting its limit to 70 mph on certain rural stretches of I-93.