

METRO-MOBILITY TALKS

House Bill 55 - New Law Aims to Make School Zones Safer

CITY BEGINS POSTING SIGNS IN LOCAL AREA SCHOOL ZONES

Beginning in March 2010, Corpus Christi drivers will face fines of as much as \$200 for operating a cell phone in an active school zone. The Texas Legislature approved the new restrictions in its most recent legislative session. The law, which went into effect on Sept. 1, 2009, has not been enforced because the city is required to post warning signs in school zones. Drivers can be fined as much as \$200 for a single offense.

House Bill 55, enacted by the Texas Legislature in 2009, makes it illegal to use a "wireless communications device" while operating a motor vehicle within a school zone unless the vehicle is stopped or the device is used in a hands-free method. Exceptions also are made if the driver is making an emergency phone call to specific entities such as the police department, fire department or an emergency response service.

Charlie Cardenas, City Traffic Engineer, said the city solicited advice from Corpus Christi area school districts in regard to where the signs should be posted first. The Calallen and Flour Bluff districts requested that signs first be posted near high schools, while Corpus Christi, Tuloso-Midway and West Oso school districts preferred that elementary schools receive first priority.

The city has 500 school zones, including private and parochial schools, requiring a total of 1,000 signs. Some schools have as many as seven school zones, Cardenas said. A school zone is established on streets that run adjacent to a school and, in some cases, on nearby streets. Routes marked with "Safest Way to School" signs are located in school zones, Cardenas said, and will receive the new signs.

The signs, which will be posted below signs denoting school zones, state: The City has received and begun posting the first 100 signs, Cardenas said, and the city street department estimates that it will be able to install between 100 and 125 signs per month. The goal is to have all of the signs posted by the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year.

The City will pay low bidder Crystal Signs of Gonzales, Texas \$22,000 for 1,000 signs. Signs will be purchased with funds generated by the city's automated red-light enforcement program, which uses cameras mounted on traffic signals to photograph vehicles that run red lights. The vehicle owners are issued tickets and proceeds pay for safety-related items. Cardenas said a first violation of the new law involving the use of wireless devices in school zones would result in a \$50 fine and subsequent fines would increase to as much as \$200.

The Corpus Christi Independent School District will post its first signs in school zones at Menger and Windsor Park elementary schools on Alameda Street, Garcia Elementary School on Greenwood Drive and Prescott Elementary School on Gollihar Road.

The Corpus Christi Police Department has already begun enforcement of the new law as of March 9th, Capt. Veseley said during the March meeting of the Corpus Christi Transportation Advisory Committee held at city hall. The City has asked schools to inform parents through flyers and other forms of communications, and the City's Public Information Office plans to issue a news release to local media.

Dr. Victoria Smith, Principal of Windsor Park Elementary School said, "we have informed parents about the posted signs and new cell phone law in our March 1st Whooter newsletter and the school's web site".

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