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Michigan lawmakers investigate increasing some speed limits

By Kathleen Gray and Kristen Daum
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LANSING — Speed demons, rejoice!

Two state senators want to raise the speed limit on some of Michigan's thoroughfares.

Sens. Rick Jones, R-Grand Ledge, and Tom Casperson, R-Escanaba, said they haven't introduced a bill yet but are crafting legislation they hope to have ready to discuss this fall that would allow communities and the Michigan State Police to bump up the speed limit on all sorts of roads.

The proposal has initial support from the State Police, which along with the Michigan Department of Transportation and county road commissions, is responsible for setting speed limits on state highways and interstates.

Lt. Gary Megge of the State Police's traffic services section said most posted speed limits across Michigan are "artificially low" and don't reflect reasonable traffic patterns. In some cases, that makes roadways more dangerous, he said.

He pointed to stretches of metro Detroit freeways where the posted limit is 55 m.p.h., but the majority of drivers are traveling about 70 m.p.h.

But, with an epidemic of distracted driving — from cell phone calls, in-car infotainment systems and rampant texting — now is the worst time to be talking about raising speed limits, said Steven Gursten, a Farmington Hills attorney and president of the Motor Vehicle Trial Lawyers Association.

"We are increasing speed limits at the exact same time that there is more distraction in our car than ever," he said. "When you increase speed, two things happen: Your safety cushion of being able to react quickly disappears, and the collision that ensues is going to be more severe."

Jones, former sheriff of Eaton County, said the bill would help eliminate costly speed traps for drivers, especially in areas with artificially low limits.

"For about four decades, it's been proven that if you post the proper speed limit, it's safer, you have fewer accidents and have better traffic flow," Jones said. "If you get a ticket, auto insurance rates skyrocket, and if somebody gets a couple of tickets, they have to pay an even higher fee. It's an abuse of the citizens of Michigan."

Jones said he wants speed limits in business districts, school zones and residential streets to stay the same. But communities or the State Police should do speed studies on all the other roads in the state and make a determination of what the speed limits should be.

If it's too costly for the locals, Jones said the Michigan State Police will do the analysis for free.

The State Police and leaders of traffic safety associations in Macomb and Oakland counties agree that in areas where speeds are posted too low, most drivers will press the pedal harder, creating big disparities between the slower movers and speedsters.

"It's that variation of speed that increases the risk of traffic crashes," said Jim Santilli, executive director of the Auburn Hills-based Traffic Improvement Association of Michigan. "We're very supportive of setting speed limits at what's safe and reasonable. We don't support setting them artificially low."

John Russi, president of the Traffic Safety Association of Macomb County, said a maximum speed should be set at 75 m.p.h. on most of the state's highways.

"I do know that speed kills, and you have to draw the line," he said. "But in some areas, it would be better for the speeds to go up a little."

According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 15 states have speed limits of 75 m.p.h. or higher on some interstates. Only Texas allows for 80 or 85 m.p.h. in some areas.

The National Motorists Association, a Wisconsin-based advocacy organization for drivers, places Michigan 25th in the nation for giving out traffic violations.

The Road Commission of Oakland County already does speed studies on county roads, and officials there said they believe the posted speeds are appropriate.

"Cities have the autonomy to set the limits on their roads. One of the criticisms over the years has been that cities bow to public pressure and lower speed limits regardless of whether it makes sense or not," said Craig Bryson, spokesman for the commission.

Democrats in Lansing said they are prepared to look at the bill but want to make sure plenty of research is done to warrant raising the limits.

"And it would have to have some buy-in from locals," said Robert McCann, spokesman for Senate Minority Leader Gretchen Whitmer, D-East Lansing. "But it's something we're willing to take a closer look at."