

Phones a driving force in crashes County hopes new bylaw will save lives

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Councillor Comment
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In April, county administration will begin the process to create a bylaw controlling the use of cellular telephones while operating motor vehicles.

Since I started talking about this issue earlier in the term, I have had a surprising amount of positive feedback. Most folks are quite militant in their support of this measure and it seems that nearly everyone has at least one anecdote about being cut-off, rear-ended or inconvenienced by drivers more interested in conversation than in driving.

University studies have shown that the distraction of a telephone conversation while driving is roughly equivalent to being legally impaired – the same as having had a few drinks before getting behind the wheel.

Some have noted that other activities – makeup, smoking, fiddling with CDs or children – may also be distracting and I agree; however, we cannot fix everything at once. Cell phone use is a good place to start, as it is relatively easy to enforce. Others have suggested that the provincial government should introduce province-wide legislation. Once more, I agree. Unfortunately, unlike Strathcona County, the provincial government does not have a good record of providing leadership in this type of issue or in fact showing much interest in the health or well-being of its citizens. Like the smoking bylaw, if we do not do it first, it will never happen.

The use of cell phones while driving is only a tiny part of a much larger problem in Alberta and that is the fatalistic acceptance we have of injury producing “accidents.” “Accident” is a word we like to use in order to pretend that folks are hurt or killed because of blind chance and that there is not much we can do about it. The reality is that “accidents” kill and maim more young Albertans than all diseases combined and that most of these events are the result of carelessness, indifference or false economy.

At a time when our health care system is being overwhelmed, we must reduce the demand on health services. There is a limit to how much tax money we can spend or how many physicians we can poach from the third world. While there is nothing we can do about aging, we can through research; education and legislation divert hundreds from Alberta's Emergency Rooms, saving millions of dollars not to mention misery and loss. Injury Alberta is an organization that I encountered while doing my cell phone research. Their self-imposed mandate goes beyond the use of cell phones in vehicles to encompass all aspects of injury management and prevention. In the coming months I hope that we shall hear more from them; perhaps Strathcona County will also be able to participate in this initiative.

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