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GUEST COLUMN

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CURRENT LAW LETS TOO MANY BAD DRIVERS OFF THE HOOK

BY STATE SENATOR PEGGY LEHNER

Like so many in our community, I was devastated last October upon learning that Mayor Bob Rosencrans of Moraine had been tragically taken from us during a traffic accident near US-35. In the weeks that followed, we learned that the driver who struck Mayor Rosencrans' vehicle had done so under a suspended license. In fact, this individual had received 17 driving violations since 2003, including 14 active suspensions and three failures to reinstate.

Quite frankly, I was appalled by the circumstances surrounding this event and began contemplating ways in which similar tragedies can be avoided.

With the cooperation of the Ohio Department of Public Safety (ODPS) and the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV), we formed the Suspended and Revoked License Working Group which met this past summer. Composed of representatives from state and local agencies as well as the private sector, our goal was to identify ways to reduce non-driving license suspensions in Ohio so that law enforcement could focus on dealing with dangerous drivers and repeat offenders. Ohio drivers are currently subject to 46 possible conditions for having a license suspended, with 18 such conditions being deemed as "non-driving."

The Working Group succeeded in identifying several areas of reform that can be accomplished through minor changes in law and policy, and it is my hope that action will be taken in the near future. However, our work identified an additional license-related problem that has been plaguing Ohio in recent years.

In Ohio, people who are proven to be delinquent in meeting their child support obligations are often times punished through a suspension of driving privileges. While I agree whole-heartedly that those who neglect their financial and parental responsibilities should be subject to disciplinary action, I also recognize that a full suspension of one's license inhibits their ability to secure and maintain employment. Therefore, it is unlikely that offenders will ever be able to make good on their support obligations.

In recent weeks, I have expressed interest in allowing some of these suspended drivers to receive work privileges so that they can make good on their financial obligations as mothers and fathers.

In no way do I feel that such a move would be soft on crime, nor do I believe it will be letting offenders off the hook. Rather, I am certain that such changes would encourage a renewed accountability on behalf of those who are required to provide support, while also easing an unnecessary burden on state and local law enforcement so that we can get back to making our roads as safe as possible.

I look forward to continuing this discussion in the future and hearing the ideas of all parties.