

McGregor proposes next-of-kin database

Information would be placed in system would be available only to law enforcement

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MICHAEL J. MAURER

ThisWeek Staff Writer

State Rep. Jim McGregor (R-Gahanna) has introduced a bill in the Ohio House that would require the Bureau of Motor Vehicles to establish a next-of-kin database for all drivers' licenses and state identification cards.

H.B. 392 would not require license holders to select a person to be contacted in the event of an accident, but would give them the option of making such a designation. Although in many cases such a person would be next of kin, the bill explicitly allows the license holder to designate any person of choice.

During sponsor testimony Jan. 17 before the State Government and Elections Committee, McGregor said accident victims have died while police were trying to locate the next of kin. In those cases, there were differing last names or other obstacles that hindered quick identification.

"In the past several months we've been approached by two families that have tragically lost their adult children in automobile accidents. In one case the family was notified seven hours after it happened," McGregor said. "By this time the individual had been taken, alive, to a hospital, but soon passed away.

"In another case, the family found out second hand that their child had been involved in an accident after friends of the individual were notified. In both cases, the adult children lived alone and had a different last name than the relatives."

McGregor said that he had originally considered putting the information on the driver's license, but because of the potential cost and concerns over identity theft, it made more sense to include the information in the Law Enforcement Automated Data System, to which only police officials have access.

The bill, to be known as the Money-Burge Act, would allow the collection of name, address, telephone number and relationship to the individual of at least one person whom the individual wishes to be contacted. The LEADS database was a good choice for such data, McGregor said.

"This system is routinely updated and accessed," he said. "It works very, very well throughout our state and is used hundreds of times a minute by our law enforcement community throughout the state. This will just be one more element that is contained in the data that is there today."

In addition to McGregor, other central Ohio sponsors of the bill include Reps. Jon Peterson (R-Delaware), Jim Hughes (R-Columbus), Dan Stewart (D-Columbus), Kevin Bacon (R-Minerva Park) and Larry Wolpert (R-Hilliard).

Rep. Steven Driehaus (D-Cincinnati) questioned the need.

"I'm curious as to the extent of the problem," he said. "I appreciate the anecdotes you provided, and the examples of the two families, but how does law enforcement today go about identifying next of kin and to what extent is this a problem around the state?"

McGregor said that timing is critical because of the need to make decisions about medical care and death.

"In some cases it's not a difficult job for the policeman, but in other cases it takes hours or days to figure out who the next of kin is," McGregor said. "That presents a problem for someone in the hospital, and it also presents a problem for organ donor organizations."

Rep. Cliff Hite (R-Findlay) said he had direct experience with the issue.

"I was a head football coach, and I had an assistant football coach who was in a fatal accident," Hite said. "His mother and father found out on the television because they were not notified soon enough. I would hope, if we pass this legislation, it would keep something like that from ever happening again."