

HOUSE BILL REPORT

ESHB 1221

As Passed Legislature

Title: An act relating to the impoundment and immobilization of vehicles being operated by persons who have a suspended or revoked driver's license.

Brief Description: Impounding vehicles driven by a person with a suspended or revoked license.

Sponsors: By House Committee on Law & Justice (originally sponsored by Representatives Ballasiotes, Sheahan, Robertson, Chandler, Cody, Crouse, K. Schmidt, Costa, Scott, Buck, Kessler, Schoesler, Chopp, Johnson, Honeyford, O'Brien, Wensman, Sheldon, McDonald, Zellinsky, Thompson, H. Sommers and Mason).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Law & Justice: 2/5/97, 3/5/97 [DPS].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 4/16/97, 97-0;

Passed House: 1/12/98, 93-0.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON LAW & JUSTICE

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 13 members: Representatives Sheahan, Chairman; McDonald, Vice Chairman; Sterk, Vice Chairman; Costa, Ranking Minority Member; Constantine, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Carrell; Cody; Kenney; Lambert; Lantz; Radcliff; Sherstad and Skinner.

Staff: Edie Adams (786-7180).

Background: A person's driver's license may be suspended or revoked for a variety of reasons, including a conviction for certain motor vehicle-related offenses, being an habitual traffic offender, failing to maintain liability insurance, and failing to respond to a traffic infraction.

The crime of driving while a license is suspended or revoked (DWLS) may be committed in any one of three degrees depending on the reason the license was suspended or revoked. The first-degree offense involves driving after the license was suspended for being an habitual traffic offender. The second-degree offense involves

driving following the suspension or revocation of a license for DUI or other relatively serious traffic offenses. The third-degree offense involves driving after a license is suspended or revoked solely for secondary reasons such as failure to furnish proof of financial responsibility, or failure to renew a license after a period of suspension has expired.

Law enforcement officers are authorized to impound a vehicle in a variety of circumstances, such as when the officer arrests the driver, the person operating the vehicle does not have a valid driver's license, or the person operating the vehicle is driving with a suspended or revoked license. Courts interpreting this statute have ruled that the authority granted is a discretionary authority to impound and that this statutory authority does not authorize impoundment unless impoundment is reasonable under the circumstances and serves to prevent a continuing violation of a motor vehicle regulation.

A vehicle impounded by a law enforcement officer may be redeemed only by the owner of the vehicle or a person who has the permission of the owner and upon payment of all costs associated with the impound. A registered tow truck operator must provide a person seeking to redeem the vehicle notice of redemption rights and the right to a hearing on the validity of the impound or the costs of towing and storage. The district court has jurisdiction to hear all matters relating to impoundment. If the court determines that the impoundment was invalid, the person or agency authorizing the impoundment is liable for the towing and storage costs and for damages for the loss of the use of the vehicle.

If an unauthorized vehicle is found abandoned and removed by a law enforcement officer, the last registered owner is guilty of a traffic infraction and is responsible for the costs of removing, storing, and disposal of the vehicle. The last registered owner is relieved of this liability if he or she filed a report of sale or transfer with the Department of Licensing (DOL) or a theft report with a law enforcement agency. Vehicles left in a tow truck operator's possession for 96 hours are considered abandoned. Tow truck operators who store abandoned vehicles must comply with certain procedures, including sending a notice of custody and sale to the registered owner of the vehicle within 24 hours. If the vehicle is not claimed within 15 days, the tow truck operator may auction the vehicle, and if the vehicle is not sold at auction, the tow truck operator must sell the vehicle within 30 days for scrap or apply for title to the vehicle.

A security interest in a vehicle may be "perfected," which generally establishes priority over other claims to the vehicle, by submitting to the DOL the certificate of ownership and an application for a new certificate of ownership containing the secured party's name. The security interest is perfected at the time of its creation if these documents are received within eight business days of the creation of the security agreement.

There are two statutory provisions that prohibit a vehicle owner from knowingly allowing an unlicensed driver to drive the owner's car. One provision makes this offense a misdemeanor, and the other provision makes this offense a traffic infraction.

Summary of Bill: A vehicle operated by a person with a suspended or revoked driver's license, or by a person who is driving while under the influence (DUI), is subject to impoundment by a law enforcement officer pursuant to local ordinance.

An impounded vehicle may only be released pursuant to a written order from the agency that ordered the impound. The person redeeming the vehicle must pay all towing and storage fees, and if the operator of the car is the owner, must establish with the agency that ordered the impound that all fines, penalties and forfeitures owed by the owner have been paid. An agency that ordered a vehicle impounded may order the release of the vehicle on the basis of economic or personal hardship to the spouse of the operator, taking into consideration public safety factors, such as the operator's criminal history and driving record.

If the vehicle is impounded because the driver is in violation of DWLS 3, and if the driver has a previous DWLS violation in the past five years, the vehicle may be held for up to 30 days at the written direction of the agency ordering the impound. If the vehicle is impounded because the driver is in violation of DWLS 1 or DWLS 2, the vehicle may be held for up to 30 days. If the operator has a prior DWLS 1 or 2 conviction within the past five years, the vehicle may be held for up to 60 days, and if the operator has two or more prior DWLS 1 or 2 convictions within the past five years, the vehicle may be held for up to 90 days.

A law enforcement officer and the local jurisdiction that employs the officer are not liable for damages for the unauthorized impoundment of a vehicle if the officer relied in good faith and without gross negligence on DOL records in determining that the operator of the vehicle had a suspended or revoked license.

The municipal court is granted jurisdiction over hearings involving a vehicle impoundment authorized by an agent of the municipality.

A local jurisdiction that authorizes impoundment may provide for alternative "home impoundment" by means of a boot or device that renders the vehicle immobile. The home impoundment option is available only for cases involving driving under the influence (DUI), or vehicular assault or vehicular homicide while under the influence.

The requirements relating to unauthorized and abandoned vehicles are amended. The last registered owner of an unauthorized and abandoned vehicle is responsible for the costs of removing and storing the vehicle, even if the owner filed a theft report with law enforcement. A properly filed report of sale or transfer of a vehicle relieves a

registered owner of liability for costs of removing and storing the unauthorized vehicle only if the date of sale indicated in the report is on or before the date of impoundment. The definition of abandoned vehicle is amended to be a vehicle that is left in a tow truck operator's possession for 120 consecutive hours, rather than 96 hours. If the date on which a notice by a tow truck operator is required to be mailed falls on a weekend or postal holiday, the operator may mail the notice on the next day business day. The time period within which a tow truck operator must sell a vehicle for scrap or obtain title to the vehicle if the vehicle did not sell at auction is increased from 30 to 45 days.

The requirements for the perfection of a security interest in a motor vehicle are changed. The time period within which a secured party may submit required information to the DOL in order to have the security interest perfected at the time of creation is increased from eight business days to 20 calendar days. A report of sale of a motor vehicle is properly filed if all required information is submitted and the DOL notes on the document that it was received within five days of sale.

A new mechanism is created for the perfection of a security interest in a vehicle, which allows a "transitional ownership record" to be submitted to the DOL in the place of a certificate of ownership. The transitional ownership record must contain specified information and may only be used as an ownership record if the certificate of ownership is not in possession of the selling vehicle dealer or new security interest holder at the time the transitional ownership record is submitted to the DOL and won't be available within 20 days of the date the security interest is created.

The provision that makes it a traffic infraction to knowingly permit an unlicensed driver to drive the person's car is repealed.

Local governments may submit claims for reimbursement to the Legislature if the act mandates an increased level of service by local governments.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: The current system for dealing with people who drive without a valid license is ineffective, inefficient, and doesn't protect the public safety. Prosecuting and incarcerating these people is extremely costly and doesn't work as a deterrent. Most injury accidents are caused by drivers with invalid licenses. Often, the person will drive away from the scene after being cited by the officer and told not to drive. The only way to keep these people from driving is to take away their cars. Jurisdictions that have aggressively pursued impoundment have had dramatic

decreases in traffic offenses. There are concerns with allowing immobilization because of the potential liability problems that could arise if the car is vandalized. In addition, there are concerns relating to tow truck operators having to establish whether a person has a valid drivers' license and insurance, and having to pay for the costs of impound if a vehicle is subsequently forfeited. The bill should be amended to protect security interests in the vehicle and provide timely notice to secured parties.

Testimony Against: None.

Testified: Representative Ballasiotes, prime sponsor; Ed Crawford, Police Chief, Renton Police Department (pro); Dr. Cindy Horton, citizen (pro); Captain Marsh Pugh, Washington State Patrol (pro); Lieutenant Mike Qunell, Lakewood Fire Department (pro); Mark Sidran, Seattle City Attorney (pro); Evan Simpson, Harborview Medical Center's Injury Prevention and Research Center (pro); Lisa Thatcher, Washington State Auto Dealers (with concerns); Stu Halsan, Washington Tow Truck Association (with concerns and suggested amendment); and Lynda Henriksen, Department of Licensing (with concerns and suggested amendment).