

Bill to change DUI law dies in state House

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OLYMPIA -- One bill to change Washington's DUI law died this week in the state House of Representatives, but another has made progress in the Senate.

House Bill 2506 would have raised a felony DUI conviction from a Class C felony to Class B, but the measure failed to move out of a House committee after a public hearing earlier this week.

Its prime sponsor, Rep. Brad Klippert, R-Kennewick, said the main purpose of the bill was to give judges the authority to order community custody or other treatment options for inmates at the end of their sentences.

Under Class C felony guidelines, a judge cannot add custody time if a sentence has reached its legal maximum.

Under Class B guidelines, Klippert said a judge would have the authority to do that, noting that a person's chemical dependency justifies treatment to prevent him or her from reoffending.

Several citizens testified this week against the legislation, arguing the bill could unfairly target medical marijuana users who need the drug to prevent medical problems, such as seizures, while they're driving.

However, Klippert said the bill was aimed at repeat offenders, no matter the substance.

"To me, it doesn't matter if it's liquor, marijuana or any other drug," he told the Herald. "If it's your fifth conviction of DUI in 10 years, we need to ensure public safety by keeping you off our roads."

The bill would have increased maximum sentences for felony DUI convictions from five to 10 years, and increased fines from \$10,000 to \$20,000.

Under state law, a DUI becomes a felony if a person has four or more convictions in 10 years.

Senate Bill 6090, sponsored by Mike Padden, R-Spokane Valley, would cut that number of DUI convictions from four to three for a felony DUI.

The bill passed out of its committee and is awaiting action by the Senate Committee on Ways & Means to consider the financial impact.

Last year, there were 223 third-time DUI offenders in the state. If those misdemeanors were filed as felonies, they would bring in more fines but also trigger higher court costs as cases shifted from municipal and district courts to superior courts.

If passed, officials expect an estimated 335 cases per year.

The state Department of Corrections could end up spending \$6 million more in the next biennium to house and supervise those new offenders.

"It's not punishment we're going after," said Klippert, who works as a Benton County Sheriff's deputy. "It's public safety that is the paramount thing we're concerned about."

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Read more here: <http://www.thenewstribune.com/2014/02/07/3034770/bill-to-change-dui-law-dies-in.html#storylink=cpy>