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Governor, lawmakers working on changes to state DUI laws

Gov. Jay Inslee met with key state lawmakers Tuesday about a potential overhaul of the state's drunken-driving laws. An agreement is not yet close, but participants are confident they can get something done.

By [Brian M. Rosenthal](#)

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OLYMPIA — A bipartisan group of state lawmakers said Tuesday it is working with Gov. Jay Inslee on a package of proposals that could overhaul how the state responds to drunken driving.

The quintet — Inslee and a member of each party from each legislative chamber — has so far agreed only on law changes included in a bill introduced weeks ago and on the need to invest more in making sure DUI offenders install ignition-interlock devices.

The lawmakers said they hope to use momentum from two recent fatal crashes to pass sweeping — and likely expensive — changes.

“This is an opportunity for us to get really aggressive about drunk driving,” said state Sen. Adam Kline, D-Seattle. “We want to take this opportunity. We want to seize it.”

Three people were killed and two others critically injured in recent Seattle-area crashes that authorities tied to alcohol. Statewide, about 200 people now die annually in alcohol-related crashes.

Among other ideas, the lawmakers are considering proposals to boost treatment for those convicted of DUI, make drunken driving a felony on the third conviction — it currently is on the fifth — and require cars impounded during DUI arrests be outfitted with interlock devices that prevent cars from starting unless the driver is sober.

State Rep. Roger Goodman, a Kirkland Democrat who has championed DUI laws in recent years, said his priority is ensuring that those arrested for a DUI are brought before a judge more quickly.

Currently, some arrested for DUI are released and not charged for months.

A key obstacle to the proposals would be costs.

A third-time felony DUI law, for example, is expected to result in 1,200 new prisoners, forcing the state to build a new prison at a cost of some \$200 million, Goodman said.

Goodman said the proposals could be funded, in part, by extending an expiring 50-cent-per-gallon beer tax. But that tax may be needed to help close a roughly \$1.3 billion budget shortfall and increase education spending.

Senate Law & Justice Committee Chairman Mike Padden, R-Spokane Valley, said some of the ideas may need to be phased in.

The proposals would also face logistical challenges.

Outfitting impounded cars with interlock devices, for example, would be difficult because the devices must be installed at a specific location and must be calibrated using the driver's (sober) breath, said Steve Luce of the interlock device company Smart Start.

More longshot proposals, such as establishing random sobriety checkpoints, would likely encounter resistance from civil libertarians.

In a letter sent Tuesday, Seattle Mayor Mike McGinn and all nine City Council members asked lawmakers to consider taking action this year.

Also Tuesday, the state's Impaired Driving Working Group gathered for a two-hour meeting in the Capitol to brainstorm next steps.

Attendee Karen Minahan fumed after the emotional meeting that "we're still talking about the same law changes we have been for the last 16 years."

Minahan lost her right leg in an alcohol-related crash in 1997.

The state has stiffened DUI penalties over the past 15 years and alcohol-related crashes are falling, but [a recent Seattle Times analysis](#) found they are not falling any faster than non-alcohol-related collisions.

The lawmakers said Tuesday this year's package could be the most significant in years.

Inslee said he's making this issue a priority.

"If we had terrorists driving around with bombs in their trunk, we would have a much more aggressive, much more assertive, much more comprehensive response to this crime," he said. "And that's exactly what a drunk driver is. It's a ticking time bomb."

The governor's office is expected to take the lead, for now, in pulling together the various proposals.

The package is expected to move forward as amendments to [House Bill 1482](#), the agreed-on proposal that would expand DUI courts and restrict deferred sentencing.

Padden's Law & Justice Committee has scheduled a Thursday work session on the issue.

The legislative session is scheduled to end April 28.

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