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Editorial: Proceed with caution on DUI legislation

A proposal to stiffen penalties for repeat drunk drivers is a worthy goal, but adds complication to an already crowded special legislative session.

Seattle Times Editorial

THE recent series of fatal car crashes involving egregiously drunken drivers with prior DUI arrests rightly focused the state Legislature on preventing future tragedies.

Since the regular legislative session ended, negotiators from the Senate Republican and House Democratic caucuses and Gov. Jay Inslee's office struck a tentative compromise to significantly stiffen penalties for repeat drunk drivers. That bill is expected to be quickly introduced this week.

Perhaps too quickly. Despite the worthiness of the concept, this is an expensive proposal — estimated at as much as \$20 million — added at the eleventh hour.

Provisions that speed up prosecution and extend jail sentences require significant new court, drug-treatment and jail resources. And a provision to make a fourth DUI conviction a felony potentially adds 900 new inmates to the state's at-capacity prison system within five years, increasing the pressure to build a new \$250 million prison.

These are serious short- and long-term budget issues being added to an unusually busy agenda for a 30-day special session, which begins Monday. Lawmakers have plenty to do: balancing the budget with reforms and new revenue and making progress toward compliance with the state Supreme Court's McCleary ruling requiring more K-12 education funding, while not further degrading higher education or eviscerating the social-safety net.

But the DUI proposal, negotiated by Rep. Roger Goodman, D-Kirkland, and Sen. Mike Padden, R-Spokane Valley, with Inslee's staff, is not an all-or-nothing bill. It directly responds to the recent tragedies by mandating ignition interlocks be installed pretrial and requires continuous alcohol monitoring for repeat offenders. Those could be carved off.

Repeat drunken drivers are a menace. A Seattle Times analysis found that one-fifth of the 600,000 DUI-related cases between 1998 and 2012 involved a defendant with multiple DUI charges.

A fully baked response balances accountability with recognition that alcoholism is a disease. It identifies a revenue source, such as new taxes on liquor, wine or beer, and gives lawmakers time to fine-tune.

How that all happens in an already crowded special session is as fuzzy as a brain with a hangover.