

Edmonds eases penalties for driving with a suspended license

Some offenders will now receive a ticket instead of possible jail time.

by [Joseph Thompson](#)

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EDMONDS — The city is changing how it treats people who drive with suspended licenses.

In early November, Edmonds Mayor Mike Nelson and interim Police Chief Jim Lawless announced officers would no longer file criminal cases for the sole offense of operating a vehicle with a suspended license. Previously, it could lead to time in jail. Later that month, the city council voted to make the change permanent.

Instead, police will issue a civil infraction that comes with a \$250 ticket. Paired with typical traffic violations, the total ticket can reach up to \$550.

“Criminalizing the stand-alone offense of Driving While License Suspended in the Third Degree can lead an individual down a spiral of debt, inability to drive, loss of job, and worse,” Nelson said in a news release. “That downward spiral hits particularly hard among lower-income individuals and people of color. In Washington State, Black people are three times more likely to be charged, and Native Americans are twice as likely to be charged, with this offense.”

Drivers can have their license suspended for many reasons — from not paying a speeding ticket to being convicted of hit-and-run.

In Edmonds, the new rule does not apply to people previously convicted of hit-and-run, vehicular assault, vehicular homicide, attempting to elude, DUI, or 10 or more driving-while-license-suspended offenses.

Nearly a third of all prosecutions in the city’s court deal with drivers with suspended licenses, Nelson said.

Councilmember Luke Distelhorst helped lead the council’s initiative, with councilmember Susan Paine.

Driving with a suspended license is the most-charged crime in the state, Distelhorst said.

The new citation will clear municipal court and law enforcement resources for other issues, he said.

“It’s providing options that keep people out of jail,” he said. “The overall goal is to get people re-licensed.”

Now, the prosecutors, defenders and judge of the city’s municipal court are tasked with figuring out how they’ll handle drivers who don’t pay the ticket, or fail to appear for their court date.

They could send the unpaid ticket to collections, opt for a diversion plan that speeds up the re-licensing process, set up payment plans or let people use volunteer hours to pay what they owe.

Snohomish County and the city of Lynnwood have made similar changes, in addition to several other cities and counties across the state.

Each government handles the issue differently. Edmonds leaders are asking the Legislature to bring a statewide approach to the issue.

Last year, state Sen. Jesse Salomon, D-Shoreline, sponsored a bill to improve the state’s re-licensing program, in particular in cases in which people are charged with driving with a suspended license. The bill did not make it out of the Senate.

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