DWI exception bill passes in Senate

Capitol news bureau

A bill that would allow a college or vocational-technical school student who gets a DWI conviction to retain his driver's license to attend classes passed in the Senate on Wednesday by an overwhelming majority.

Senate Bill 330 by Sen. Cliff Newman, D-Lake Charles, was approved 32-4. The measure now goes to the House.

Newman said the bill would give students the same consideration given to working people who are allowed to retain their licenses so they can go to and from work.

A person convicted of a first-offense DWI or who refuses to take a DWI test has his driver's license suspended for 60 days under current state law.

Newman's bill would allow full-time college students and those attending vocational-technical schools who have had their licenses suspended or revoked for the first time to petition district court in the parish where they live for a restricted license.

Under the law, a student would be allowed to drive only on streets that would enable him to get to school and could operate a vehicle only one hour before and one hour after school.

Sen. Richard Neeson, D-Shreveport, argued against the measure, saying that college-age students represent the greatest share of DWI fatalities.

"This is a group that has the opportunity for education and knows the consequences and the risk that goes with it," Neeson said.

He said not allowing them to drive would be "character building" for the students and "would send out a message that we're serious about the DWI statutes."

Newman said some students would have to drop out of school if not allowed to retain their licenses. Also, he added, many adults who are going back to school would be affected by the measure.

Voting against Newman's bill were: Neeson; Sen. Ken Osterberger, R-Baton Rouge; Sen. Ken Hollis, R-Metairie; and Sen. Sydney Nelson, D-Shreveport. Absent and not voting were: Sen. Armand Brinkhaus, D-Sunset; Sen. J.E. Junonville, D-Ventress; and Sen. William McLeod, D-Lake Charles.