Drinking, driving proposal opposed

By MIKE HASTEN
State Editor

BATON ROUGE — Acadiana lawmakers tried to kill a bill Thursday that would have stripped driving privileges from minors who have been drinking and driving.

The bill, by Rep. Bernard Carrier, D-Denham Springs, fell one vote short of passing, 51-38, in the House but can be brought up again for a vote Friday.

Reps. Don Higginbotham, D-Lafayette, Elias "Bo" Ackal, D-New Iberia, Harry Benoit, D-Breaux Bridge, Armand Castille, D-Opelousas, Ted Haik, D-New Iberia, Chris John, D-Crowley, Raymond "Lala" Lalonde, D-Sunset, and Dale Sittig, D-Eunice, opposed the measure as being unfair to young people because they were to be subjected to more stringent laws than adults.

Carrier said he wants to stop drinking and driving by persons 18 years and younger by revoking drivers licenses for teens who are found to have at least a blood alcohol count of 0.02. State law says anyone with a count of 0.10 is legally drunk.

The bill calls for the same penalty as a DWI — suspension of license for three months on first offense and for a full year for each subsequent offense.

"If we can save one life with passage of this bill, I think we will have succeeded," said Carrier.

Lalonde questioned the accuracy of breath analysis machines at such low levels as 0.02.

"The accuracy of this machine is very questionable on the low end," Lalonde said. "You may have problems here. A blood test is much more accurate."

Sittig said he realizes it is not popular to vote against a bill dealing with drinking and driving but "we're quick to pick on the kids. Nobody here is willing to make it 0.02 for adults but we're going to do it to 17 year olds."

To register 0.02, a teen could have as little as half a beer, lawmakers said.

"This kid will carry this on his record as a DWI for five years because he drank one beer," Sittig complained.

The House threw out Sittig's attempt to table the bill and another that would have made the provision apply to all ages. The only amendment approved was one that would grant reinstatement of a suspended license without charge.

After pointing out that any person under age 18 who is drinking is doing so illegally, Carrier told the House "All this bill is trying to do is save lives of minors."

Here's how local lawmakers voted on lowering the DWI blood alcohol level for minors to 0.02.

FOR — Bacque, LeBlanc, Theriot
AGAINST — Ackal, Benoit, Castille, Haik, Higginbotham, John, Lalonde, Sittig.