Lawmakers delay vote on child car seat bill

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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Lawmakers, divided between concerns for safety and practicality, delayed action Monday on a bill to require all children under 6 years old to be strapped down while riding in a car. HB425 by Rep. Ted Haik, D-New Iberia, would require all children under 3 years old to ride in an approved car seat. Three-and 4-year-olds could either sit in a car seat or be restrained by a seatbelt.

Proponents of the bill said its provisions could save 21 young lives last year.

"If would reduce the risk of death by 90 percent" in a traffic accident, Baton Rouge pediatrician Larry Hebert told the House Transportation, Highways and Public Works Committee.

No one spoke against the bill, but several members of the committee voiced concerns that it might unduly burden poor parents who may not be able to afford a $50 car seat — or a maximum $50 fine provided for violators.

Others said it would be unfair to place a legal burden on friends or relatives who might only occasionally transport someone else's children.

Before suspending debate until Tuesday, the committee rejected an amendment that would have exempted drivers from the law while they are transporting children who are not their own.

"Grandmas and grandpas and uncles are not exempted from accidents," Rep. Sam Theriot, D-Abbeville, said in opposing the amendment.

Rep. Donald Ray Kennard, D-Baton Rouge, said the requirement would be impractical for people who may have to buy a car seat for every car in the family.

But Rep. Kathleen Blanco, D-Lafayette, who said she is a mother of six, said one seat can be transported with the child from one car to another.

Kennard also said a survey of his constituents indicates strong opposition to the state telling parents how to take care of their children.

"The people of my district feel like that's a decision they should have to make," he said.

"I know you say we had 21 deaths. We also have 45 million people in this state," Kennard said.

"If we save 10 lives... that's enough for me," Hebert said.

Two other lawmakers have filed similar bills. The committee is scheduled to hear those measures Tuesday, then decide which, if any, of the bills should be sent to the House floor for further action.

The measures are backed by the Jaycee Women, the State Police, the state epilepsy foundation and a number of other civic and safety groups.

Rep. Ted Haik, D-New Iberia, and Dr. Larry Hebert tell legislators about child safety seats