Record number of bills target DWIs

By MARSHA SHULER
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It’s likely the Legislature will adopt stiffer penalties for drunken driving this session, with legislative hearings scheduled to begin next week on some of the three dozen bills aimed at getting drunken drivers off the streets.

Legislators, responding from a citizen outcry led by such groups as Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD) or experiences that have touched their own lives, submitted a record number of bills on the issue.

Gov. Treen is also making the legislation one of his priorities this session in an attempt to reduce Louisiana’s ranking as second in the nation in alcohol-related fatalities.

There are almost as many approaches to the problem as there are bills.

The bills address the problem at virtually every stage, from restricting alcoholic beverage sales to stiffer penalties and jail terms for offenders to help for the alcohol abusers.

The proposals include raising the legal drinking age to 20, holding bars liable for accidents caused by their drunken patrons, banning alcoholic beverages in vehicles, prohibiting “go cups,” suspending drivers’ licenses, establishing mandatory jail sentences, creating the crimes of vehicular homicide and vehicular negligent injuring.

Proposals to help the alcoholic include a plan to require treatment at a substance abuse facility as part of the penalty for driving while intoxicated and requiring mandatory coverage of alcoholism, drug abuse and chemical dependency in certain insurance policies.

The House Administration of Criminal Justice Committee is scheduled to hear a series of bills Wednesday. The Senate Judiciary C Committee will do the same thing the following week.

“Drunk driving is going to be a major area of legislation this time because so many people have so many ideas about it. It is a subject very much on the mind of the people,” said Rep. Loy Weaver, D-Homer, chairman of the House committee.

Sen. Fritz Windhorst, D-Gretna, chairman of Judiciary C, said he would like to see a bill develop that will include a mandatory 48-hour jail sentence or public service work on a DWI conviction and that a .10 percent alcohol blood content be considered proof of intoxication.

“Everybody is starting to realize we have been soft on it (DWI) in this state,” said Windhorst. “So many people do it, it is hard to be tough on it. We need a real change of attitude on this.”

Windhorst and Weaver said their committees plan to hear the legislation and decide upon a uniform approach to the problem, with perhaps an omnibus DWI bill developing instead of separate bills approved in a scattershot approach.

“It is time to take a hard-nosed approach with stiff penalties to deter the drinking driver from playing roulette with our lives,” Treen said of the motivation behind his DWI legislative effort.

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