impaired charges laid after two die in northeast crash

JASON VAN RASSEL
CALGARY HERALD

Two people died early Sunday after a high-speed crash in northeast Calgary allegedly involving an impaired driver.

Police have charged a 23-year-old man with impaired driving causing death in connection with the crash on McKnight Boulevard N.E. at Deerfoot Trail.

The victims were a 27-year-old man and 24-year-old woman inside a westbound Dodge Avenger that was stopped for a red light when a Lexus GS300 plowed into the back of their car.

The driver of the Dodge was killed in the impact, which pushed the car more than 50 metres. The woman died in hospital a short time later.

Police said the Lexus travelled an additional 30 metres before coming to a stop.

Police at the scene arrested the driver of the Lexus, who wasn't injured.

A 24-year-old passenger in the vehicle suffered only minor injuries.

Their names haven't been released.

Ryan Thomas Kramer, 23, has been charged with two counts each of impaired driving causing death, driving over .08 causing death and dangerous operation of a motor vehicle causing death.

The crash is the second multiple fatality involving alcohol in Calgary the span of a week and comes as the provincial government mulls tougher penalties for impaired drivers.

Alberta's solicitor general said impaired driving has been a persistent problem for years.

"This is not a knee-jerk reaction. It's an ongoing issue, and I think something has to be done about it," Jonathan Denis said Sunday.

Alcohol-related deaths have been decreasing in Alberta but still made up a significant portion of the 351 traffic fatalities recorded in 2010.

> This is not a knee-jerk reaction. It's an ongoing issue.
>
> SOLICITOR GENERAL JONATHAN DENIS

CRASH: Alberta looking at B.C. impaired penalties

Among those, Alberta Transportation reported 90 drivers had been drinking prior to the crash — 57 of whom were legally impaired. That number represents a 25 per cent decline since 2007.

In the past year, however, neighbouring B.C. has logged a 50 per cent decline in alcohol-related fatalities since introducing tough administrative penalties targeting impaired drivers.

B.C.'s administrative rules impose penalties for drivers with a blood-alcohol concentration above .05 but below the criminal standard of .08.

Drivers who register within that range can be subject to a 72-hour licence suspension and pay fines and associated fees totalling more than $600. The suspensions and fines increase for drivers repeatedly caught within that range.

Between October 2010 and July 2011, B.C. recorded 49 alcohol-related fatalities, down from an average of 93 deaths over the same period in the past five years.

"Something obviously is working when you have such a marked reduction," Denis said.

Denis, Justice Minister Verlyn Olson and Transportation Minister Ray Danyluk were given mandate letters from Premier Alison Redford last week instructing them to develop administrative penalties targeting impaired drivers.

While B.C.'s measures have attracted significant attention, Denis said the government is looking for a "made in Alberta" regimen that incorporates what works best in B.C. and other provinces.

B.C.'s legislation has drawn criticism from civil libertarians because of the heavy penalties it imposes against motorists who haven't exceeded the criminal threshold and the limited avenues of appeal available to drivers.

Denis said Alberta is looking at a fair appeals process and the intent of the legislation isn't to target drivers "who have a glass of wine with a meal."

Current provincial traffic regulations allow police to issue 24-hour suspensions against drivers who appear impaired but do not exceed the legal limit of .08.

However, the current law has no method of sanctioning drivers who habitually rack up 24-hour suspensions — new administrative penalties akin to B.C.'s would address that loophole, said Denis.

"We're after the people who persistently drink and drive," he said.

"I feel there should be some escalation in the penalties."

JVANRASSEL @JASONVANRASSEL