

IMPAIRED LAW AT CENTRE OF DISPUTE



Dean Bicknell, Calgary Herald

Wildrose party candidate Richard Jones holds some coasters with slogans opposed to Bill 26, the Alberta Tory government's pending drunk driving legislation that will penalize drivers with a blood-alcohol level over .05.

Wildrose party's .05 coasters rouse the ire of MADD

Group claims effort courts 'loud minority'

JASON VAN RASSEL
CALGARY HERALD

Strict impaired driving regulations are stirring up a bar fight between critics and backers of the provincial legislation.

An anti-Bill 26 campaign by the opposition Wildrose party distributing coasters in bars and restaurants across the province is drawing fire from Mothers Against Drunk Driving, which supports the legislation.

"We're seeing them put a po-

litical campaign over and above public safety," MADD Canada president Denise Dubyk said. "I guess it's to gain popularity with a loud minority."

The Wildrose party has promised to repeal Bill 26, which was passed by the provincial legislature but has not come into force.

The law will impose administrative penalties on drivers with a blood-alcohol concentration above .05, which is lower than the .08 reading required to lay criminal charges.

After running out of an initial run of 15,000 coasters, the party has 55,000 more on the way to distribute to bar and restaurant owners throughout Alberta and their patrons.

"It has been very well re-

ceived," said Richard Jones, Wildrose's candidate in Calgary-Acadia, who has been spearheading the campaign.

On one side, the Wildrose coasters have ".05" inside a circle, with a red line struck over the numbers and the slogan "drink responsibly." The other side has the governing Progressive Conservatives' name in the red circle, accompanied by the messages "Say 'No' to (Premier) Alison Redford" and "Vote responsibly."

But the Wildrose effort has spawned a counter-campaign from Mothers Against Drunk Driving, which responded Friday by saying the party is misleading the public.

"Let's get the right information out," Dubyk said. "Results

have shown at .05, your driving ability is impaired."

Under Alberta's law, drivers who register between .05 and .08 will be subject to a 72-hour licence suspension, have their vehicles impounded and pay fines and associated fees totaling more than \$600.

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

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.

SEE COASTERS, PAGE B4

COASTERS: Enforcement is key

FROM BI

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

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.

But Jones said the decrease

in fatalities has more to do with an increase in traffic enforcement.

Beefed-up traffic enforcement and more checkstops targeting impaired drivers are more effective means of protecting motorists than enforcing a lower blood alcohol limit, said Jones.

"Unless you're going to enforce laws, it's not going to make any difference," he said.

Current provincial traffic regulations already allow police to issue 24-hour

suspensions against drivers who appear impaired, but do not exceed the legal limit of .08.

However, authorities had no method of tracking and sanctioning drivers who habitually rack up 24-hour suspensions — something the province has incorporated into Bill 26.

WITH FILES FROM JAMES WOOD;

CALGARY HERALD

JVANRASSEL@CALGARYHERALD.COM

TWITTER: @JASONVANRASSEL