

Drivers distracted as ever

With legislation one year old, police see no let-up in violations

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CALGARY HERALD

Nearly one year after the implementation of distracted driving legislation, police, the AMA and the minister of transportation say too many drivers are refusing to hang up their

hand-held phones.

Sept. 1 marks the anniversary of the country's strictest distracted driving legislation, and in Calgary police have been seeing a steady rise in the number of tickets issued.

Calgary police say they have written an average of about 10 of the \$172 tickets per day.

"This needs to be back on people's radar," said Acting Insp. Michael Watterston of the Calgary police traffic section.

"It's a year later and, as a city, can we be proud to date that at the end of July, 3,649 violations have been issued? Not a proud moment in our driving pattern given all the attention it's been given," Watterston said.

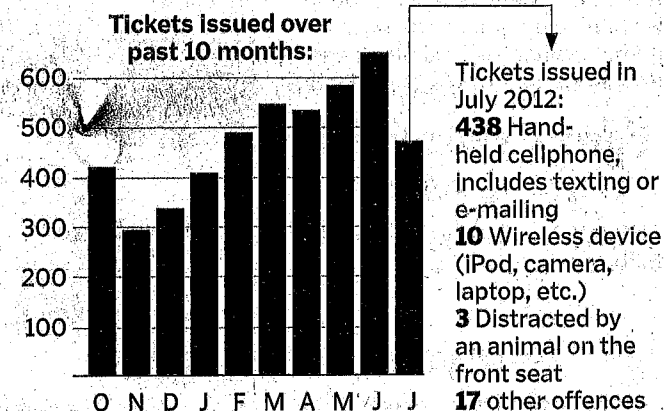
The province's distracted driving legislation is con-

sidered one of the strictest in Canada because it also penalizes other bad driving behaviour such as grooming, reading or programming a GPS.

However, the vast majority of tickets are for using a hand-held phone.

Tickets were also handed out to drivers distracted by a pet, playing with an MP3 player and knitting.

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DRIVING: Public 'back to old ways'

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Transportation Minister Ric McIver said the legislation is making a difference, but added "it's not making the level of difference that the people who put it in probably hoped for."

Asked if there should be more enforcement or better driver education, McIver said it's something he's still contemplating.

"They say you can't enforce common sense and it does seem like common sense that when one is driving, one pays attention to that task," he said.

"On the other hand, a lot of people are under a lot of pressure in this world to give instant answers and to get back to other people — whether it be their boss, their customer, their spouse — in a short period of time. I think we need to help people adjust their expectations that way."

Police and the Alberta Motor Association say that when the legislation was first implemented, they saw less distracted driving.

"People were voluntarily complying," said AMA spokesman Don Szarko.

But as attention on the issue began to fade, cellphone use while driving went up.

"The general public perception seems to be that Alberta drivers are back to their old ways," he said.

McIver said he's not aware of any court challenges on the year-old legislation from people who have been ticketed.

The tickets do not carry any demerit points for the driver and McIver said he is not looking at changing that.

Police say they will continue to enforce distracted driving as they are now.

"This is one of those sections that we will continually need to reinforce. We know it's an applicable piece of legislation because not paying attention on the roadway is dangerous," Watterston said.

"It's a high risk manoeuvre if you're driving a 3,000-lb. piece of metal and not paying attention — anything can happen."