

## No excuse to not wear a seat belt

**THE ISSUE** | Ten percent of Americans still don't wear seat belts.

**OUR OPINION** | Wearing a seat belt could save your life, and at the very least, keep you from getting a ticket. There's no excuse not to wear it.

On the average new vehicle, you'll find high-tech air bags that protect us from the front and side; crumple zones that help protect occupants in collisions, particularly head-on; and sophisticated braking and handling systems to help us avoid accidents altogether – the greatest form of safety.

None of those safety features could save Daniel Tiftt or Megan Archer when the vehicle in which they were riding hit a tree Aug. 6 along a rural road in a small town in eastern New York.

Tiftt, 23, and Archer, 19, were thrown from the vehicle when it hit the tree. They died at the scene, according to the Associated Press.

Neither was wearing a seat belt at the time of the crash.

Yes, we are driving the safest cars ever made. But all those advancements aren't reasons for people to forgo seat belts.

At one time, seat belts were an ignored device that motorists in the 1960s and 1970s routinely stuffed inside their seats – at least until states passed laws enforcing their use.

There was plenty of grumbling when the law took effect in 1985 by those who felt the government didn't have the right to tell us what to do, but most of us eventually complied – most, but not all.

Statistics indicate almost 1 out of 10 drivers still don't buckle up, and the reasons are many. Some think they're uncomfortable, others don't like the government telling them what to do, and still others assume accidents happen to other people, not them.

And then there are those who think all those other safety improvements, like airbags, mean they don't need seat belts anymore. They're wrong. Safety advocates say air bags are considered a supplemental restraint system, with seat belts acting as the primary restraint system.

And as police, rescue and ambulance folks will tell you, many people have suffered needless injuries or deaths because they were thrown from their cars in crashes.

We're not sure if Tiftt or Archer would have survived the crash if they were wearing their seat belts. But they would have stood a better chance.

And if you think not wearing a seat belt is no one else's business, you're wrong. Hospital costs for unbelted crash victims are 50 percent higher than for those wearing seat belts. Of course, that drives up the cost of health care.

So buckle up. You don't have a good reason not to.

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Corning clocktower by artist  
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### ARTIST'S VIEW



COMMENTARY | STATE SEN. TOM O'MARA

## One incentive at a time

Are there any better symbols of summer than the hundreds of volunteer firemen's fairs, festivals, pancake breakfasts and chicken barbecues that dot the upstate New York landscape in August? They take their place among the season's most anticipated celebrations and highlight the volunteer fire department as a mainstay of community pride, service and protection.

The history of the local fire department is traced at least as far back as Benjamin Franklin's establishment of the Union Fire Company in Philadelphia in 1736. In other words, it's an institution as old as the nation herself. Today, according to statistics, volunteer fire departments account for 73 percent of all of America's fire departments. Very simply, each one stands as a source of civic pride and community involvement. The men and women who keep these organizations going year after year are literally lifelines of community action and support.

But always in the background, anytime we consider the future of volunteer emergency services, is this: prominent organizations like the New York State Association of Towns and the Firemen's Association of New York (FASNY) point out time and again their economic value. For instance the Association of Towns (www.nytowns.org) issued a report several years ago that pegged the cost to local taxpayers statewide at more than \$7 billion annually to replace volunteers with paid fire and ambulance services.

According to FASNY (www.fasny.com), the number of volunteer firefighters statewide has dropped from 140,000 in the early 1990s to fewer than 90,000 today. Volunteer emergency medical technicians (EMTs) declined from more than 50,000 to 35,000 during the same period, with some rural counties experiencing as much as a 50-percent depletion of their EMT ranks.

New York government has its hands more than full for the foreseeable future. We face stubborn economic and fiscal challenges, and we have to realize that the choices we make today are going to have an enormous impact on tomorrow. In my view, our focus must include the long-term ability of local volunteer fire companies and ambulance services to recruit and retain volunteers.

One dominant issue confronting next year's Legislature will be mandate relief. The closer we get to 2012, the louder will become the calls from local leaders across New York to lift the burden of unfunded state mandates once and for all. And rightly so. This burden isn't only undeniable, it's unfair and unreasonable. A state-appointed Mandate Relief Team (www.governor.ny.gov/mandaterelief) remains at work identifying ways to bring about the change that's needed.

With that in mind, I'll offer this suggestion: if you think the local share of Medicaid represents an unmanageable burden for many counties, consider what's going to happen if the corps of emergency services volunteers continues to shrink. It's the

next property tax crisis in waiting. Can we do more to avert it? We have to at least consider that possibility, and we have to do it now. Not addressing the challenge may not fall under the category of an unfunded mandate, but it would surely constitute an unintended mandate.

There are factors outside of government's influence that contribute to these declining volunteer ranks. But there are actions that government can and should take to provide incentives that just might help reverse the decline. New York State has initiated valuable tax breaks, tuition assistance, and other incentives, like a new law two years ago to allow volunteers to participate in certain public employee health insurance plans. But can we do more? That's the goal behind legislation I'll continue to sponsor, together with area Assemblyman Phil Palmesano, known as the "Emergency Services Volunteer Incentive Act." Our act would put in place a mix of tax relief and other incentives aimed at attracting volunteers.

Its purpose is twofold. It keeps attention focused on the overall issue, and it serves as a starting point for an overdue discussion on how to respond. In the meantime, support our local volunteer ranks by stopping at a festival, buying a tasty breakfast or supper, or dropping a couple of bucks in the boot. It all helps – and it shows your appreciation.

■ **Tom O'Mara is a Republican state senator from Big Flats.**

### OTHER VIEW | L.A. TIMES

## Oil and the Arctic may not mix well

Shell Oil's proposal to drill three exploratory wells in the Beaufort Sea off Alaska's North Slope received a conditional go-ahead last week from the Obama administration even though the Interior Department has not yet approved the company's plan for responding to a catastrophic oil spill. That plan fails to address adequately many of the harsh realities of drilling in Arctic seas. It's too early for any approval, conditional or otherwise.

Exploratory offshore drilling in the Arctic doesn't present the same potential for danger as, say, BP's offshore rig in the Gulf of Mexico. The hazards of drilling in the Arctic are quite different and in some ways worse.

Shell's wells would be just 160 feet underwater, as opposed to the 5,000-foot depth of BP's Deepwater Horizon well, source of the largest offshore oil spill in U.S. history. That, at least theoretically, would make the Arctic wells easier to cap. But there are other important differences. BP's rig was located in generally calm waters that happen to contain oil-degrading bacteria. The gulf's concentration of oil rigs also makes it a hub for Coast Guard rescue equipment and drilling expertise.

Shell's response plan contends that it can clean up 95 percent of spilled oil, an unprecedented percentage even in much less hostile environments. But the skimmers and booms that are usually employed to clean up spills don't work effectively in waters with large amounts of floating ice. Nor is there any guarantee that Shell would be able to get disaster equipment to the wells. Canada's National Energy Board recently reported that on one day out of five, conditions in the Arctic, including the Beaufort Sea, are too harsh to send out spill-response teams. Meanwhile, the nearest Coast Guard station is 1,000 miles away, and the agency told the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation that it cannot be counted on to respond to spills off the North Slope.

Shell's proposal must clear other hurdles before any drilling can take place. For example, the company must show other federal agencies that its activities would not harm polar bears or marine life. But the application shouldn't have reached this point without a response plan that is realistic about the environmental dangers of seeking an energy future in the Arctic seas.

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