

Bethel residents say they'll buckle up

by Geoff Kennedy

for the Tundra Times

BETHEL — Alaska's controversial seatbelt law has drawn overwhelming support in a recent Bethel telephone survey.

In the survey of 50 people on Labor Day, 82 percent supported the law and 90 percent said they would obey it.

The law, which goes into effect Wednesday, requires persons over 16 to use seatbelts in motor vehicles which have them.

Another state law already in effect requires adults to ensure children are riding in approved safety devices.

The new law exempts passengers in school buses and persons who deliver mail or newspapers to roadside mail and newspaper boxes. It forbids removing seatbelts from vehicles to get around the law.

It also forbids peace officers from stopping vehicles just because people aren't wearing seatbelts. But, if peace officers stop vehicles for other violations, they may cite the passengers for failing to wear seat belts as well.

Violators of the seat belt laws will pay a \$15 fine or donate that amount to the community's Emergency Medical Services.

Gov. Steve Cowper signed the bill into law June 14.

Sen. Al Adams, D-Kotzebue, vigorously opposed the bill. Adams

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—Bethel Police Chief Jack MacDonald

had tried to amend the bill to exempt rural Alaskans from the requirement. Requiring urban Alaskans to wear seatbelts makes sense, he said, but not rural Alaskans.

Adams and Sen. Rick Halford, R-Chugiak, were the only opponents of the bill in the state Senate.

Reps. Ramona Barnes, R-Anchorage, Mark Boyer, D-Fairbanks, Cliff Davidson, D-Kodiak, Richard Foster, D-Nome, Peter Goll, D-Haines, Ben Grussendorf, D-Sitka, Lyman Hoffman, D-Bethel, and George Jacko, D-Pedro Bay, opposed the measure in the House. Rep. Fran Ulmer, D-Juneau, was excused from the vote.

Several Bethel residents believe the law comes at just the right time because construction is ending on paving and repaving 4.2 miles of the state

highway from the airport to the Brown Slough Bridge.

For that reason, the law is especially important for families with children, said Joe Stewart.

"Yeah, it's a good law," he said. "When they get the road done, people will go faster."

Geri John also favors the new law. "With our new highway, I sure do," she said.

"I'm really thrilled about it," said Pauline Thomas. "We've been teaching our kids to wear them for years."

Howard Pavil also supports the law. "I think so, with the accidents that happen on all the highways," he said.

Jennifer Nelson said she supports the law if it helps save people's lives.

The law will help, especially in

periods of freezing rain on the new highway and the newly paved parking lot of the hospital in Bethel, said Gordon Hills.

Patricia Hunt-Jones supports the new law and wears her seatbelt because of first-hand experience.

"Seeing I was just in an accident and it saved my life, I certainly do," she said. The accident occurred in California, she said.

But Vernon Keezer doubts the law will save anyone's life in Bethel.

"It's completely ridiculous," he said. "I can't remember an accident in Bethel where seatbelts could have made a difference."

Jason Wolfersheim agreed. Bethel doesn't need the law because people don't go that fast, he said.

"Here in Bethel, I don't think it's necessary when you hardly ever go over 35 miles per hour," said Jimmy Aloysius Sr.

But Bethel Police Chief Jack MacDonald expects people to drive faster on the paved highway now that the natural "speed bumps" are gone.

The Bethel police will go slowly in implementing the new law, MacDonald said.

"We don't intend to approach this from a 'gangbusters' mentality," he said. "We intend to approach this gradually with education first, then warnings and then phasing in citations gradually."