

Alaska may get mandatory seat belt law

by Marla Williams

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JUNEAU — The U.S. Highway Safety Agency's suggestion that you "buckle up for safety" will become state law if a new political action group in Alaska is successful.

With the help of some big names with big money from the Lower 48, the Alaska Safety Belt Coalition is organizing a campaign designed to put a mandatory vehicle restraint law on the books, and a seat belt around everyone in the state who drives or rides in a car, truck or recreational vehicle.

The coalition is moving in the fast lane, fueled with promises of financial support from the Motor Vehicle Manufacturers' Association, a national organization of domestic auto, truck and bus manufacturers.

A spokesman for the association, Jim Austin of Sacramento, CA, says the manufacturers have agreed to spend up to \$20 million a year over the next four years. The organization seeks to help groups like the Alaska Seat Belt Coalition win votes for state laws requiring adults and children to wear restraints when in a motor vehicle.

Exactly how much of that \$20 million the Alaska coalition is in-line to receive hasn't been determined yet, Austin says. But, Austin also says "the coalition will get whatever it needs to persuade the Alaska public and its elected officials that mandatory safety belt laws are good."

In the last six months, the Motor Vehicle Manufacturers Association has been instrumen-

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tal in establishing mandatory seat belt use coalitions in 38 states. In 14 of those states, mandatory motor vehicle restraint laws have been passed.

The use of seat belts, says Austin, is a "simple safety system, already in the car, that we know saves lives, and it doesn't cost the consumer anything extra."

State laws requiring drivers and their passengers to buckle up are also a lot cheaper for motor vehicle manufacturers than federal laws requiring manufacturers to equip all passenger cars with

automatic restraints and seat belts, Austin reluctantly admits.

The U.S. Department of Transportation has issued a ruling requiring manufacturers to equip all passenger cars built for the 1990 model year with automatic restraints, unless two-thirds of the United States population is covered by mandatory seat belt laws by April 1, 1989.

The fact that auto makers are backing groups like the Alaska Seat Belt Coalition in an attempt to avoid having to install automatic restraints and air bags, is upsetting some who otherwise support mandatory safety belt use laws.

Attorney Michael Lessmeiener represents State Farm and Allstate insurance companies, in

Juneau. Lessmeiener says his clients are "all in favor of mandatory seat belt laws," but, Lessmeiener says, "State Farm and Allstate don't want to see seat belt laws take the place of passive restraints, and that seems to be what auto makers have in mind."

That is not what Juneau Representative Mike M. Miller has in mind with House Bill 224, a measure that would require most everyone to wear safety belts when driving or riding in a car or truck.

A letter of intent accompanying Miller's bill makes it clear that

the representative does not want passage of House Bill 224 to count against the U.S. Transportation Department's decision to require automatic or passive restraints be built into cars.

Miller's bill doesn't have a lot of open support in the legislature. Many lawmakers worry they'll anger their constituents by backing a measure that would take away an individual's freedom to decide whether or not to wear seat belts.

While it is uncertain if the Alaska public favors mandatory seat belts laws, Alaskans do seem

to think wearing seat belts is a good idea.

Preliminary information from a new study, commissioned by the state's Highway Safety Planning Agency shows a comparatively large number of Alaskans wear safety restraints when driving or riding in a car.

Of 7,309 adults observed at 30 Anchorage intersections, 27.7 percent were wearing safety restraints. Only Seattle, Washington and Portland, Oregon, boast higher usage of seat and shoulder belts, the preliminary report says.