

Pedestrian safety rule to apply across N.Va.

Failure to yield can cost motorists up to \$500

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The penalty for motorists failing to yield to pedestrians in crosswalks could get a lot stiffer for some Northern Virginia residents.

A recently amended state law now allows Fairfax County and other local jurisdictions to increase the fine from \$30 to as much as \$500 for drivers who ignore pedestrians crossing the street in clearly marked crosswalks.

"Our effort is trying to bring greater awareness that there is a safe area for pedestrians to cross," said Fairfax County Supervisor Catherine M. Hudgins, D-Hunter Mill District, who asked the county board to propose the legislation to the General Assembly earlier this year.

Hudgins said she was prompted by a number of her constituents who complained about cars repeatedly blowing through crosswalks, sometimes with disastrous consequences to unwary pedestrians.

The number of accidents between cars and pedestrians is rising, Fairfax County police spokesman Jody Donaldson said. According to police statistics, 353 pedestrians were struck by motor vehicles in the county last year, including 71 who were in designated crosswalks. In 2000, 323 people were hit by vehicles, including 86 in crosswalks.

"We need additional tools to ensure the safety of pedestrians and to educate pedestrians as well as motorists or their rights and responsibilities," Hudgins said.

When the law was enacted last year, it applied only to Arlington County and the city of Alexandria, the first localities to seek an increase in the failure-to-yield penalty. As amended, the law now allows any county with an urban county executive form of government — including Fairfax

and Prince William counties — to raise the fine. The General Assembly also extended the law to cover Loudoun County and Fairfax City.

Effective July 1, the law allows the jurisdictions to raise fines to a minimum of \$100 and a maximum of \$500 per infraction.

Last year, Arlington boosted the failure-to-yield penalty to \$500 at more than a dozen crosswalks where the county installed signs warning motorists of the hefty fine. Violations also require a mandatory court appearance, "which for some people is worse than a fine," said county spokesman Dick Bridges.

Statistics on the number of tickets issued in Arlington were not available Thursday, but Bridges said he has noticed motorists being more respectful of pedestrians crossing streets in the Courthouse area.

In Reston, part of Hudgins' district, she said there have been three fatalities resulting from cars hitting pedestrians crossing roads, although none were in crosswalks. Hudgins said the new law will apply only if street-crossing pedestrians are not jaywalking.

"I think we have to seek as many tools as possible to ensure that we have safe communities," she said. "We also need to have more education to show that pedestrians as well as motorists have responsibilities" in crossing the roads.

Fairfax County government staff members are working on a plan to implement the new law. Board members must decide exactly how much to raise the fine and where signs informing motorists of the increased penalty will be placed. Hudgins said she does not know how long the process will take.

In Loudoun County, spokesman Jim Barnes said officials had not formally discussed the new law, but might consider increasing failure to yield penalties in the future.