

Driving with your dog in your lap? That could soon lead to a fine in North Carolina.

WUNC | By [Adam Wagner](#)

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George Walker IV / AP

Motorists travel westbound along Interstate 40, Thursday, May 23, 2024, in Nashville, Tenn. A record number of Americans are expected to hit the pavement over the 2024 Memorial Day holiday. (AP Photo/George Walker IV)

A bill allowing law enforcement to fine people who are holding their pets or have them in their laps received bipartisan support Wednesday during a legislative committee meeting.

Rep. Frank Iler, a Brunswick County Republican, said the legislation was inspired by his own observations driving around southeastern North Carolina.

“A lot of folks seem to ride around in their cars with their animals — small to medium dogs, usually — on their lap. And I thought that was fairly distracting,” Iler said Wednesday.

The House Transportation Committee served as the first stop for the Iler-sponsored House Bill 394. Under the legislation, **an officer could fine** any driver with a pet in their lap \$100.

The rule would also apply to situations where a driver's interactions with children or pets result in careless or reckless driving.

Several lawmakers who spoke in favor of the bill described their personal experiences watching crashes or near-crashes caused by people holding animals.

When Rep. Deb Butler's Jack Russell terrier was a puppy, it did not take the Wilmington Democrat long to realize the dog had to sit somewhere other than the driver's seat.

"I realized pretty quickly that it was a horrible distraction, that it was dangerous. So I bought some crates, and we've traveled Interstate 40 a thousand times, but PaytiePie is crated and she's safe and I'm safe," Butler told the committee.

Not all drivers come to that realization before something goes wrong.

Rep. Jay Adams, a Hickory Republican, described watching a woman in a small black Lexus fiddle with something in the car before driving off the road on Interstate 40 last week near Claremont and crashing into the bank before cartwheeling several times.

After the car crashed, Adams said, it became clear that what the driver had been paying attention to instead of the road was a toy poodle in her lap that he saw her clutching after the accident.

"What we do when we pass legislation like this is, we set a benchmark for people to observe. So it's not going to cure everything ... but it sends a message to the public that we want you to stop doing this," said Adams, who is cosponsoring the bill.

Should the bill become a law, Iler described its enforcement as likely being similar to the state's existing rule banning texting while driving.

"It would be somewhat subjective, but it would be pretty obvious that somebody's holding an animal. With their head sticking out the door, it becomes (pretty obvious)," Iler said.

North Carolina's distracted driving laws

That rule that makes texting or writing emails while driving subject to a \$100 fine is one of very few that North Carolina has [governing distracted driving](#).

A different law bans any drivers under 18 years old from using a phone while driving unless they are talking to a parent or in an emergency situation.

In 2023, 16.9% of North Carolina's [crashes involved distracted driving](#), according to a report from the N.C. Division of Motor Vehicles. That meant 47,986 accidents leading to 132 fatalities and more than 19,000 injuries.

Notably, there were 1,123 crashes where the driver reported they were distracted by something inside the vehicle other than an electronic device or a phone.

The reported figures could be low, DMV reports, because distracted driving is reported by the driver.

Hands Free bill in Senate

A separate bill in the Senate, the Hands Free NC Act, would prohibit any use of a cell phone or other communications device while driving.

Senate Bill 526 mirrors bills that have been filed in every legislative session since 2009, according to the N.C. Alliance for Safe Transportation. And 29 states have passed similar laws.

In February, Meredith College [released poll results](#) in which 51 of the 56 people polled supported legislation that restricted holding a mobile device while driving.

"A hands-free law may have more bipartisan support than any other single piece of legislation in recent history. We have polled on this for several years now and the



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The Senate bill was filed Tuesday and has been referred to that chamber's rules committee.

In the House, Iler's bill will next appear in a Judiciary committee and would also need approval from the Rules Committee before being voted on by the full chamber. If it is approved there, it would be sent over to the Senate.

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Adam Wagner is an editor/reporter with the NC Newsroom, a journalism collaboration expanding state government news coverage for North Carolina audiences. The collaboration is funded by a two-year grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

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