

Rocky bans most city employees from using phones while driving

He is calling on local businesses to adopt a similar policy

By DEREK P. JENSEN
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You won't see a Salt Lake City utility boss barking out orders on a cell phone while driving to a water leak or a parks employee texting his supervisor while en route to a cleanup.

Not if they value their jobs, that is.

Mayor Rocky Anderson signed an executive order Monday barring city employees from using cell phones while driving on public business.

The new rule, effective immediately, also applies to workers who possess city-owned phones and drive their own cars, and it includes hands-free devices.

Violators will be subject to unspecified disciplinary action.

"This is about public safety and ensuring that all travelers on Salt Lake City streets are as safe as possible," said mayoral spokesman Patrick Thronson.

The prohibition exempts city police and firefighters as well as the airport's emergency personnel. It also allows an exception if an employee faces imminent danger of injury or death.

Anderson noted three people have perished in recent accidents that resulted from the inattention of drivers chatting on cell phones. In a news conference for the ultimatum, the mayor was joined by Linda Mulkey, whose daughter Lauren recently was killed in a crash that involved a driver using a mobile phone.

"This is the first step toward making sure these sorts of tragic events don't happen in the future," Thronson said.

In addition to the executive order, Anderson is calling on businesses and

self-employed residents to adopt a similar policy forbidding cell-phone use while driving. The mayor will present the "cell-safe" campaign to the business community today.

The city's ban will remain in effect unless a future mayor repeals it — and that seems unlikely.

Candidates vying to succeed Anderson applauded the move, though Dave Buhler questioned the timing.

"I'm a little surprised it's taken this long," the councilman said, adding, "I'm fine with it."

Candidates Ralph Becker and Keith Christensen agreed phones in cars present a public safety risk and pledged to continue the ban if elected.

"It's the right thing to do," Christensen said.

Becker cited studies that suggest a person's responsiveness while driving on a cell phone is equivalent to DUI-level alcohol impairment.

Such "inattention

blindness' can slow a driver's reaction by up to 30 percent," noted Anderson, who referenced a study by University of Utah psychologists outlining the dangers.

In 2005, Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon issued a similar executive order for the county's 4,000-member work force. That came after the County Council narrowly rejected a ban by ordinance.

Buhler insisted such an ordinance on a municipal level would not be practical or enforceable since the Salt Lake Valley includes 15 separate jurisdictions.

But Anderson says that can be overcome if the Legislature acts and overturns a 2006 measure that prevents cities from passing cell-phone prohibitions.

"That clearly came from the telecommunications industry," Anderson said. "It's outrageous. We ought to have a statewide ban on the use of cell phones while driving."

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