

INTERVIEWS WITH COMMISSIONER WARD
COMMISSIONER ROBERT WARD SPEAKS ABOUT CURRENT
ISSUES THE DMV IS FACING

Introduction

KELLY MANNING: On Tuesday, March 6th, DVM Commissioner Robert Ward appeared on WNPR's *Where We Live* show with John Dankosky.

Commissioner Ward spoke about school bus and truck safety issues as well as other current issues the Department is facing. The Commissioner touched on the agency's new procedures to help prevent license fraud, as well as the Governor's proposal to have the DMV solely run Connecticut's weigh stations. Listeners had the opportunity to call in and ask the Commissioner questions.

Please enjoy WNPR's following segment with Commissioner Robert Ward and John Dankosky.

JOHN DANKOSKY: This is *Where We Live*. I'm John Dankosky. Today we continue our series of conversations with state commissioners. We will be talking to one of the newest commissioners, Bob Ward of the Department of Motor Vehicles. Ward is not a newcomer to state politics, recently stepping down as House Majority -- Minority Leader, excuse me. He takes over a department that's struggled with two recent scandals, one the death of a West Hartford man killed by a school bus driver with a criminal record; the other, a scheme to sell driver's licenses to illegal immigrants and felons. There are also many changes coming in the Department from new duties assigned by Governor Jody Rell, to new ID standards being proposed by the federal government. If you have questions for DMV Commissioner Bob Ward, call us at 860-275-7266 or email us, wherewelive@wnpr.org. Again, 860-275-7266.

INTERVIEW

JOHN DANKOSKY: Bob Ward, welcome back to *Where We Live*.

COMMISSIONER BOB WARD: Good to be with you.

JOHN: I almost gave you the Majority Leader status there, but you may have stayed at the state Legislature if you had that title.

BOB: I'm a bit jealous. I would have liked that Majority Leader status, but I enjoyed my time as Minority Leader.

JOHN: Let me ask you first, we brought up in the lead of the program the new standards for school bus drivers. This is one of your first decisions in the new job, stricter standards for people who drive kids to school. Previously some drivers had been issued temporary licenses. What exactly have you done to make this more stringent?

BOB: There were a couple of things. One, the statute really just says that if you have a crime in your background that is of moral turpitude, you can't drive a school bus, but that's not very well defined. It's really archaic language, it's hard to know what that's supposed to mean, and so our employees that were supposed to look at the records to make the decisions didn't have good guidance. I said we ought to adopt as our standard a law that says there are certain crimes if you committed you can't be a coach or a school teacher. The same thing should apply to somebody who is driving that school bus, who is transporting the kids. So we've adopted, if you will, by reference the standards that the Legislature approved for teachers or coaches.

In addition to that, we've said we will never issue a temporary license. What happened in the one case with Mr. Fountain is that he cleared an initial background check, the state computer system didn't show a criminal record, but they didn't have the reports back when you look not just on a computer system with date of birth and name, but also a fingerprint analysis. So we've said no longer will we issue a temporary license until an FBI and state criminal background check based on fingerprints are completed.

JOHN: So it's going to be a much more rigorous standard for people to meet.

BOB: I think not only a tougher standard but significantly we should have all the information before we make a decision. In the past the Department, feeling pressure to quickly get people through the system because the school bus companies say, hey, we have to hire drivers, we have to have them, we have a high turnover rate. So every year as school gets started they're trying to put a lot of people through. We said that doesn't matter, safety has to trump sort of hurrying up the process. But we are taking some steps to try to process them quickly as well.

One is the purchase of a new machine to electronically take fingerprints so they can be electronically transmitted both to the FBI and to the State Police.

JOHN: A few Democratic lawmakers had brought this up at the Capitol not too terribly long ago. What prompted you to take this action now?

BOB: Well, when I first came in, obviously, reading the newspapers I was generally aware of the situation. I looked at the reports that had been written but not yet released. It was written in December, and part of it showed that there were no clear standards. It also showed again there had been a policy of temporary license and within a matter of probably a week of being there I said we ought to make a final decision on this, no temporary licenses, let's reorganize the unit, let's be sure that we have properly trained employees there and take those steps. And that was really one of the first things -- and I said we have to release the report. The public ought to know what our own internal investigation showed.

JOHN: Do you have a way to go through all of the school bus drivers in the State of Connecticut and really take an accounting of whether or not the people who are currently licensed or are driving school buses at this point, do have the qualifications, are the people who should be driving kids to school?

BOB: We are trying to look back at records. They all have to be renewed, and at all renewals a full background check is done again. We are also in the process of going through, comparing the lists of who the drivers are with the criminal records. It's not

fully up to speed so I'm not sure we're catching everything right now, but we should be close do doing that.

In addition, there's legislation pending which would ask school bus companies to provide us electronically with all their employees every month so we could on a batch basis rerun them every month, and that's our goal, is to recheck on a monthly basis.

JOHN: Something new that's come down since the beginning of the year. Governor Jody Rell has asked the DMV to be the agency to inspect trucks on the road, taking over from the State Police. Could you give me a little bit of the idea of the breadth of what the DMV is being asked to do compared to what state troopers in these truck units were doing before?

BOB: Sure. For a long time DMV has been the lead agency on truck safety, but duties at weigh stations have been split between the Department of Motor Vehicles that operates the Union Station, and Public Safety or State Police that operates Danbury and Greenwich. In addition, both State Police and DMV could do other what we call portable inspections, stop trucks at different places.

The Department of Motor Vehicles really has been the lead in safety inspections. Last year we took 13,000 unsafe vehicles off the road. That means our inspector stopped them for some reason, whether at a weigh station or otherwise, did a detailed inspection that takes almost an hour to go through a truck at one of those inspections, and took 13,000 of them that were ordered not to move that truck until it would be towed from where it was and the safety matter is addressed.

The Governor has asked to consolidate all of those within the Department of Motor Vehicles, I think recognizing that our folks are inspectors who are certified as police officers but specifically trained in truck safety, specialize in it, and there can be more strict enforcement. If one agency is fundamentally responsible for it from top to bottom, will then be held accountable for all of the truck safety issues.

JOHN: Is the DMV, are the DMV officials the most efficient way to get unsafe trucks that are on the road off the road? Seemingly if that's put in DMV control entirely, you're going to catch people at weigh stations but you're not going to catch everyone certainly, and I'm wondering how you might move forward trying to get as many of the unsafe vehicles off the road as possible under these new guidelines.

BOB: First, I want to be clear that nothing in the bill would prevent State Police if they see a truck operating and stop it for any reason, any highway violations, could enforce any of the truck safety laws.

JOHN: Of course.

BOB: So we're not trying to take away their highway functions in any way. We would be adding addition personnel so we could keep weigh stations open more hours, and then significantly, the routes around weigh stations is a place that's fertile ground. If people know the weigh station is open, trucks that don't have great records will try to circumvent it and we set up portable scales, but again if not, just wait, our inspectors will review that truck from top to bottom, and that's really the focus.

In addition, if we see violations from a particular trucking company, we have the right, and we'll do it, to go into the trucking company and inspect an entire fleet, and that's something else that we do do and we'd like to more of if we have more personnel.

JOHN: One specific place in the state that this has come up of course is Avon Mountain, Route 44, the terrible dump truck accident that killed a number of people. It's one of many accidents that have happened on that highway. We'll maybe get to larger highway safety issues in just a little bit, but in that particular issue, do you think that since that event the state has taken the correct steps to try to keep something like that from happening again? What do you think you can do as DMV Commissioner to take it even a step further?

BOB: Certainly the Department prior to my getting there did take some steps with Governor Rell's direction, which is to simply beef up the enforcement, dedicate more

personnel to that, make a real effort to look at the records of companies that are local companies and, again, go in and inspect the fleet if we either get a tip that there's a lot of problems, or we keep records and we can look up on any particular company if there have been violations found either at a weigh station or on the roads, and if we see too many we can go in and inspect the fleet, and that's something we're paying more attention to. And I think as Commissioner what I would like to see is us increase the number of inspections. The budget proposed that we get six additional inspectors and that's where we want -- we want the inspectors really focusing on truck safety as much as possible, and be more efficient in the other duties that we have to do, for example, testing drivers of new trucks.

JOHN: The testing of drivers of new trucks seemingly is a very important thing. That as just a terrible perfect storm of an unqualified driver, an unqualified truck, breakdowns all across the system. Talk about how you can make the operators of vehicles like dump trucks and large rigs more accountable, safer on the roads for everyone, not just for themselves.

BOB: Well, there is in fact a new federal mandate that when somebody comes in to get a commercial driver's license you will now look back for a 10-year driving history. So we would have more information about what that person has done, and if they accumulate too many violations or have had violations even in other jurisdictions, in other states we can prevent -- either not renew the license or prevent them from getting a license in the first place.

The other part of it is sort of an education. When you go into a company to inspect an entire fleet, that's putting them on fair notice of what they need to do to comply with the law, and we are not in the business to take people out of business, but if there are too many violations, that can result.

JOHN: Obviously, Avon Mountain, one of the places where there was a terrible accident, there are many accidents all the time on places like I-95 and places like I-84. Very crowded roadways, crowded with lots of traffic, including drivers of large vehicles. I'm

wondering how you feel in your role you can balance the need to not take everyone off the road, as you say, who maybe had some sort of violation because you don't want to completely slow the flow of commerce, but at the same time protect people as much as possible. It seems as though there are an awful lot of vehicles on the road, large vehicles compared to several years ago, and in order to keep those vehicles safe it seems like an overwhelming task to make sure all the people and the vehicles themselves are in proper functioning order.

BOB: Well, it is a bit of an overwhelming task. One of the things the Department does to -- and I think we need to do more of -- there's something called C-Vision which many of the interstate trucks actually have a transponder and as it approaches a weigh station it tells us who the driver is electronically, who the bus company is. The computer screen will pop up and tell us that company's history. If it's a company that has a great history we may elect not to look at that truck except once in a while you'll check that company because they have such a good history, and it allows us to focus on companies that the history isn't so good. So it's really trying to use technology. Also, there's "weigh in motion" so the truck doesn't even come to a complete stop before it gets to the weigh station, and you get a rough indication of whether it's generally within the proper limits. So it's trying to enhance that technology and we're going to need to upgrade some of that as well.

JOHN: How closely are you working with the folks at the Department of Transportation in trying to alleviate some of the congestion problems caused by many, many large vehicles on the highways, especially like I-95? In your role, what do you see you can do?

BOB: Really at this point as DMV Commissioner, being there seven or eight weeks, I've not been directly working with DOT, and that's pretty much their function, but at any time we would be happy to share statistics with them. We do cooperate in terms of the truck safety and making them aware of companies that have good or bad records, and there are some federal reporting requirements as well, but the actual, if

you will, design of the highway, traffic flow and traffic patterns, is more of a Department of Transportation function than a DMV function.

JOHN: Bob Ward is the new Commissioner of the DMV, the Department of Motor Vehicles. He's our guest today as we continue our series of conversations with state commissioners. If you would like to join our conversation, you have a question, 860-275-7266, or email us, *Where we Live*, at WNPR.org. We will be talking about licensing in just a little bit and more safety issues with DMV Commissioner Bob Ward. Again, 860-275-7266. This is *Where We Live*.

(Commercial break.)

JOHN: This is *Where We Live*. I'm John Dankosky. Today on the program we're continuing a series of conversations with state commissioners. We're talking with Bob Ward, he is the new Commissioner of the Department of Motor Vehicles. He recently stepped down as House Minority Leader. He's been at the Capitol for years now working in the DMV. A lot of news to discuss at the DMV, and we want to get into some licensing questions, ID questions in just a second, but I should ask, what are some things that have surprised you so far about this job, Bob Ward? It seems as though when I think of the DMV a lot of people think of, you know, standing in line to try to get a license done and you don't think of much else. What surprised you coming from outside into the game?

BOB: I think the breadth of issues that the Department covers and the number of separate small departments or small divisions that I needed to get up to speed on and try to learn about, I think is probably the most significant. We all know you need to get your license renewed or you need to get your registration renewed, or you went there at 16 or 17 years old to get your first license, but there is a lot more to both security of the records we maintain, to preventing fraud in obtaining a license, to preventing fraud in obtaining that, and also our regulation of auto dealers and everybody from every part of it.

A letter came across my desk the other day with a junkyard that says we're not treating them correctly, and I was not an expert in junkyard laws. I entered the DVM and so I needed to get up to speed to see if our customer is right or wrong.

JOHN: One of the things that has sort of struck the Department over the course of the last few years is this case in Bridgeport where some workers were convicted of selling licenses to people. The last sentence in this scandal was recently handed down. Essentially, selling licenses to felons, selling licenses to illegal immigrants, first of all, how big a problem do you think this was, how big a problem do you think it still is and what are you doing to keep it from happening again?

BOB: Well, any time you have employees taking bribes and issuing licenses to people who aren't entitled to them, that's a big problem, even if it only happened once or twice. We certainly think it happened perhaps hundreds of times. The Department in fact was paying police -- overtime to the State Police to fully investigate, because we have made it clear if you were involved in this activity we are going to find out and prosecute to the fullest extent of the law.

I think that we've gotten to the bottom of it in this sense. We've changed the procedure. It used to be that one employee could handle the entire issuance of the license from when you walked in the door, looked at your papers, approved it, took your picture and handed you the license. Now three or four different people are going to be a part of that transaction. That greatly reduces the chance of inappropriate or illegal behavior. Now you have to get three or four people in on it, and we know human nature, that's much less likely to occur. The temptation isn't really there if you need to involve your co-workers.

The Department also created a unit to investigate any complaints of that sort. If managers think something is wrong we have people who can come in and investigate. So that's another important part, one, knowing that we will enforce it, that we have an investigative unit, and that we put safeguards in so one employee doesn't have access to everything.

JOHN: So, you think that moving forward you will be able to tighten this up even in places where perhaps you haven't found the root causes where it hasn't blown open the way it has in Bridgeport.

BOB: Certainly that's our goal. We think that we can. There will always be somebody that will commit a crime or do something illegally. Our job is to catch it as soon as it happens and to discourage it, and you know a 10 or 20-year jail sentence also sends a message to the Department that it just isn't worth it.

JOHN: A part of the entire problem of people selling illegal IDs is the fact that the driver's license which is issued by the DMV is something that's issued so that people who are residents of the state can drive a vehicle, but it carries so much more weight. It carries the weight of essentially de facto ID around the United States and even overseas at times. It has so much more to it than just a Connecticut driver's license for someone starting at the age of 16. With some of the new federal requirements that are going to be coming down, the idea of the Real ID, tell me exactly how your Department is positioning itself to be able to meet some of these new federal requirements and issue a driver's license that is both something that will allow people to drive but also will act as a broader identification.

BOB: Actually, Connecticut has for some time had one of the more secure licenses. It's difficult to forge, it's difficult to copy, it's difficult to alter. We also for a long time have checked those things that the Real ID Act requires us to check, or at least most of them. To get your first license you need to bring in an original birth certificate or to bring with you a passport, and we have a proofing station to try to detect whether the passport itself is legitimate. We check and verify Social Security numbers before issuing that. So there are a number of -- and Connecticut has for many, many years checked to see if you have a legal status in this state, and we will not issue a license if you don't have proof of legal status. That means citizenship, so a birth certificate would cover it, or if you are here legally but on an immigrant status, we verify that you

have the proper immigration papers. Not every state does that, but Connecticut has done that.

So the new mandate won't require us to do much different than we've done with this very big exception: Everybody is going to have to go back through the system once as if it was an original license, and we're trying to analyze the accuracy, what that impact will have on lines and have on our customers.

JOHN: Some critics say that what this does is it essentially sets DMV agents, people who work at the Department of Motor Vehicles, as immigration agents, as people who are dealing with issues much larger than they have been trained for. The idea that it's not just issuing a license to a 16-year-old kid, it's really doing all these background checks. In some cases, again, the critics will say much more intensive background checks than the DMV is set up to do.

BOB: I don't think it's more than we're set up to do because, again, in Connecticut for quite some time we've taken your picture, it's a digital photo, that's one of the new federal requirements. We've already done it. Most people don't realize that Connecticut has state-of-the-art digital photography that allows us to compare one photo to another. It's not completely up and running at this point but it will be as we process through. When you come in to get a driver's license the first thing that will happen is take your picture. Right now it's the last thing. That will be compared to our entire file of photos to see if anybody else has asked for a license with your name but the picture doesn't match. We will also find that there's an individual who has claimed licenses under multiple names, so we will be able to catch that kind of fraud. And we do have that technology in place already. We are in the process of what I would say is cleansing our files. We have six million photos on file because people have had two and three pictures taken. We are scanning through those so everybody has just one picture left on file.

So we have some things in place already. Again, the real challenge for us will be, you may be 60 years old, you've had driver's licenses since you were 16, you

brought your birth certificate in when you were 16 or 17 years old, you are now going to have to bring that back under the federal mandate. So you won't be able to renew just by bringing in your license and having us renew it with your certifying that's your current residence. So that will be a challenge for us because the volume will increase substantially.

JOHN: As of right now, the Real ID Act as it stands at the federal level, it's not exactly been finalized. There's no finality to what states are going to have to do at this point from what I understand.

BOB: That's correct. We are close to finality. They just a couple of days ago issued the preliminary regulations. There's a 60-day comment period. In fact, the memo will go out today, we are convening a task force to go through every, every word in those regulations to determine what impact it will have on Connecticut, and then more importantly find the solutions for those impacts and find the best way to be as productive as we can with it.

JOHN: If you have questions for Bob Ward, the new Commissioner of the State DMV, you can call us at 860-275-7266. Again, 860-275-7266.

Let's go to Rick, who is calling from Hartford. Rick, go ahead. You're on *Where We Live* with Bob Ward.

CALLER: Good morning, gentlemen. How are we doing today?

JOHN: Doing fine. Thanks.

CALLER: Yeah, I have a question. He was also talking about the Pre-Pack, the transponder having the (unintelligible). One thing that -- and I have done this myself before, I kind of shy away from it because, you know, it is dangerous, but as far as the 11 and the 14-hour rule, I think it is a good rule. You know, they changed it back in '96, but my question not only for like, you know, the Pre-Pack with the drivers, you know, allow them to move on without actually coming to a complete stop. But do you foresee anything coming up as far as when they scan the Pre-Packs, do you know anything about the driver, so on and so forth? But what about actually scanning the

license plate? And I know that you know, I won't say the trucking company's name, but they have -- they basically have the paperless log so, you know, just punch in when they get out of their truck, when they feel -- when they break, thinks like that. But isn't it possible, you know, sometime in the near future to do that with all trucks to find out when the driver, you know, logged on and took a break? Because I know there are drivers that do go over their 11 hours, unfortunately.

I was driving to make a delivery appointment on time which --

JOHN: Sure.

CALLER: Honestly, you know, there will be fatigue which puts, you know, all the drivers, you know, even at more risk.

JOHN: Let me get a comment from Bob Ward.

BOB: I think I understand the question. Certainly one of the things our inspectors look for when a truck is stopped is also to inspect all of the records about the driver and that specifically includes hours of operation, and if they're over hours, they're stopped right then. I think you're asking if we can do that electronically perhaps by scanning the plate, and I'm afraid I don't really know the answer to that.

Again, he is right, we have been trying to do it with a transponder system, although that requires the cooperation of the companies. The larger companies want to cooperate with it because they don't want their truck stopped for an hour, so they want to have that information, and again it is sort of built into the system that even if they have got a good record you periodically stop them and check. There's probably more we can do. I'm not sure of the technology to do that by scanning the license plate. Of course, they are issued in 50 different states.

JOHN: So, Rick, thank you very much for your phone call.

CALLER: Okay. Thanks a lot, guys. Have a good day.

JOHN: Thank you very much.

One thing, as Rick brings up scanning license plates, it's sort of a different topic but I will ask, some talk about different places around the state where cameras

could be used to take pictures of drivers as they go by various checkpoints to check whether or not they are speeding, driving erratically, driving dangerously. They would take a picture of the license plate and the vehicle. Where are we with that? I know that that's been talked about in various places around the state.

BOB: It's certainly been debated in the General Assembly. From the Department's point of view there was a specific question about Avon Mountain.

JOHN: Sure.

BOB: At DMV I took the position that if the local community wanted it, we would support them with it but we weren't demanding it. The people have raised civil liberty issues. I don't quite buy those with regard to that, but I recognize those issues. So we weren't really in the middle of that fight but any community that wants to do it, the Department would probably be supportive of that, certainly in a pilot program so we see how it works. Early stages it seems to be fairly accurate because it can photograph not just the license plate but the driver.

JOHN: If the General Assembly were to move forward with larger statewide ability to do that, it seems as though it's something that you would support.

BOB: Again, it's really a legislative issue.

JOHN: Sure.

BOB: And it may not affect directly our Department. That might have more of an impact on the Department of Public Safety, the State Police or even the criminal justice system in the judicial department that would process those infractions or ticket. Where it would affect us, if the number of tickets that were issued were up, that could result in license suspensions and the like if they were moving violations. So, it could have an impact on us. We are not really in the middle of that fight right now.

JOHN: Let's go to Kimberly who is calling from West Hartford. Kimberly, go ahead. You're on *Where We Live* with Bob Ward.

CALLER: Hi, I'm a West Hartford parent with a child who takes the bus and so I was hoping we could go back to the earlier topic.

JOHN: Of course.

CALLER: I think that's great that you're making the rules stricter for bus drivers. I'm just wondering, you had mentioned that bus companies really scramble at the end trying to get people, hire people. Is there anything else we can do to provide incentives to get qualified people to be bus drivers?

JOHN: That's a good question.

BOB: It's a very good question, and to some extent that's an issue for the local school board to decide whether when they put contracts out to bid they want to require certain pay levels, which I think one of the issues in the turnover is pay. It's sometimes an issue of benefits. Some of the companies have been successful by providing benefit programs, and they found a lot of moms of school children will then take that job because it provides benefits to the family and they're willing to work the split shifts and they can be around when the kids are around, but it takes some creativity on the part of the bus company, really incentives, because they're all private employees. The Department is not directly involved in incentives for drivers. We're more on the enforcement end to make sure that anybody who gets licensed is properly trained, passes a test and passes a background screening.

JOHN: But one of the interesting things, Commissioner, is that the state, and certainly the federal government, and the state increasingly seems willing to stick its nose in and ask for greater accountability for school teachers to say that you must meet certain standards if you are going to teach kids. It seems as though -- and it's supposed to come with some sort of benefit too, it's supposed to come with better teachers are going to be rewarded more. It seems as though the same thing could happen with school bus drivers to try to attract the very best people to the profession.

BOB: I certainly agree incentives could be put in place. At this point that's sort of a local school district issue as to what requirements they have, and different districts, for example, also put monitors on the bus to help protect children. We don't really license the monitors per se but that's something we've talked about with the Department. If

they are going to ride a school bus, should we be doing background checks on school bus monitors as well.

JOHN: Thank you, Kimberly, very much for your phone call.

CALLER: Great. Thank you.

JOHN: This is *Where We Live*. We're talking with Bob Ward, the DMV Commissioner.

Another question about school buses from John in Hartford. Go ahead, John, you're on *Where We Live*.

CALLER: All right. Well, thank you very much and congratulations to Bob on his appointment.

BOB: Thank you.

CALLER: Bob, my question is why is not the issue of seat belts on large school businesses not raised. They are required on small school buses and the American Pediatric Association and the American PTA Association have both supported putting seatbelts on school buses. Why is not that issue included in the debate?

BOB: Again, I think that's a good question. I have not carefully looked at it. I got a letter probably maybe about a week ago on the issue. Back 20 years ago when I was on the education committee I remember debating it, so the debate goes back that long. At that point there were some studies that suggested the design of buses were such that they weren't really necessary. Certainly I'm an absolute believer in seat belts with automobiles. Besides it being the law, it just makes sense. People ought to wear them --

CALLER: Oh, I mean they're on airplanes. I mean children are fully capable of putting on at least a lap seat belt. I know there was one group that says, well, they're a little concerned because maybe they could be used by kids as weapons against each other, but I think kids can figure out a lot better weapons to use (laughter). I mean I just think the time has come for kids to be able to have lap seat belts on school buses.

BOB: Again, I don't agree or disagree with you. We haven't taken a position. I personally have not studied the issue. It has been debated in the Legislature and you

might want to bring that question there because, again, I think it is time to relook at that. Bus companies have made arguments, and school districts at times have made arguments they are not needed, how could they be sure the kid wears them. I think those can be overcome. It really ought to be a question of science and if the evidence is there that it really does add the safety, if so, they ought to be there. I just don't personally know the answer to that question.

JOHN: I'm wondering if in your role, and obviously you are brand new to this job, how much you feel you are going to be able to be an advocate for those things that you do feel very strongly about. Let's say you are able to get science that says, yes, we definitely want to have seat belts on school buses in Connecticut. How much do you think your role as DMV Commissioner is to go to the Legislature and say this is something that needs to get done now?

BOB: I, in fact, do think that's an important part of the job. I certainly haven't gotten into it yet. In fact, the Legislature votes on me on Wednesday so I'll officially keep the job for a period of time, but I want to familiarize myself and not make quick judgments on what areas. I have said I think we need a task force to look at the issue as drivers age or develop medical conditions. Are we doing a good enough job to be sure that we are retesting in some way or following up when we have information? Frankly, I think the answer is we are not doing a good job but we don't know yet the best way to do that.

And so that is an area where I expect to be an advocate for safety, to talk about the Legislature passed 17 years ago to retest drivers I think after age 70, but it's been postponed every year for 17 years, so it's never gone into effect. We need to find an effective system to do that.

I think seat belts on school buses is another issue that first we need to gather all the facts, but if I think the facts were clear I wouldn't hesitate to advocate, and I do think there is an opportunity in this job to be an advocate for safety.

JOHN: John --

CALLER: Do you want another question?

JOHN: Well, you know, John, I actually have other callers on the line so I'm going to let you go, but thank you so much.

CALLER: Good luck. Thanks.

JOHN: Appreciate it. This is *Where We Live*. I'm John Dankosky and we're visiting today with Bob Ward. He is the Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection. Let's go to Chuck -- excuse me, the Commission of the Department of Motor Vehicles. I just gave you another job today, Bob.

BOB: I'll stick with DMV.

JOHN: Wow, that's a harder job than even the DMV job I think. The number, 860-275-7266. I'm sure Chuck from Storrs has a good question. Go ahead, Chuck. You're on *Where We Live*.

CALLER: Thank you very much for taking my call.

JOHN: You're welcome.

CALLER: My question for Mr. Ward, I believe he touched upon this subject just a moment ago, is does Connecticut have anything in the works or any plans to try to either above a certain age limit or at certain mandatory intervals retest drivers to make sure that they are keeping up on their ability to operate a motor vehicle.

JOHN: And you just touched on this. I'll ask you, Bob Ward, you said it's something that's been passed in the Legislature, put off for years. So the 70-year-old drivers you were talking about 17 years ago, now 87 years old, it seems -- talk to us a little bit more about why this has been held up.

BOB: It's been held up essentially over money. The original estimates, it would cost more than a million dollars more for the Department to require vision testing of all drivers, and I think the age was 70 years old. There's also issues raised on whether that's discrimination based on age. You sort of make an assumption that at a certain age that you should be re-vision tested whereas your eyesight might have changed sooner than that.

JOHN: Yes. Isn't it discrimination based on age to say that you have to be 16 years old?

BOB: Well, I don't buy the discrimination on age, although I am sensitive to seniors with a sense that if they are going to be at a higher scrutiny and they lose their license, have you taken away their ability to live their normal lives and that's a very real issue in our society. Nevertheless, I think from the Department's point of view it needs to be focused on safety, but we need to convene all of the people that are involved in the issue and come up with a system, because it isn't just eyesight, it isn't just vision. It's probably also reflexes, and it isn't a cutoff at a certain age. That can change greatly over time, but certainly, you know, I got my license at 16 years old, didn't wear glasses at all at that point, my vision has changed a great deal, but I've never had to go back to have it rechecked. It makes sense to have some method in place and hopefully we can find a cost-effective method.

We do deal with drivers that have health issues, but it's catch as catch can now. If a police officer sees somebody and stops them for an accident and thinks they just don't have the ability to operate a car, they can take the license away and then we have a medical review unit that looks into that and there's a hearing process. Similarly, sometimes the Department will get a phone call from a grandchild that says, you know, grandma really can't drive, she's going to hurt somebody, but within the family they can't convince her to give up the license so they call us and we will investigate that and call people in for a hearing. But that really is, again, very catch as catch can. It can be effective, but you probably miss many, many cases.

JOHN: You miss many cases and it seems as though that seems to leave the door wide open to have every time you investigate an older driver it's after something bad has happened. It seems as though you wait until something bad has happened and then you say, well, maybe she shouldn't have been driving.

BOB: That's pretty much -- it's very much a reactive system, not a proactive system, and we need to --sometime within the next year or two I hope to have a plan for the Legislature for a year from now, I'm not promising that, that's my goal however, to

some way relook at drivers to be sure that they still have all those necessary skills to be able to drive.

JOHN: Chuck, thank you so much for your phone call. I appreciate it.

CALLER: Thank you very much.

JOHN: This is *Where We Live*. We're going to take a quick break now. If you have a question for Bob Ward, the new Commissioner of the DMV, call us at 860-275-7266, or of course you can email us, *Where We Live* at WNPR.org.

(Commercial break.)

JOHN: This is *Where We Live*. I'm John Dankosky. Today we're continuing our series of conversations with state commissioners. One of the newest commissioners is Bob Ward of the Department of Motor Vehicles. He is taking your questions at 860-275-7266.

We have talked about a number of safety issues. We have talked about scandals surrounding people selling licenses at the Bridgeport DMV, and we have talked about school bus safety quite a bit. There has been some talk recently in the news again about a tighter crackdown on people driving while using cell phones. The cell phone ban is something that was hotly debated or maybe coolly and then hotly debated over many years of your time in the state Legislature. It finally came to pass. It seems as though it's one of those laws that's on the books that doesn't really get enforced, and I'm wondering about your view on it and whether or not somehow or other it needs to be strengthened.

BOB: Well, I think it does get enforced but clearly not as often as there are violations. And as in all of our laws, law enforcement personnel are given some discretion as to when to write tickets and when not to. One of the debates is to increase the fine, which is now I believe \$100 fine maximum. I don't actually think increasing the fine will increase enforcement. I suspect that to some extent the police officer may say, well, you know, if it's going to cost him two or \$300, then I don't want to write the ticket. I want to just give them a warning.

Also, the law allowed for a first arrest that you could have the charge dropped if you went and bought a hands-free device. So we may have gotten through that first cycle and I think you will see some stepped up enforcement now and fewer of those charges being dropped. About half of the time people were given a ticket the charges were dropped as I understand it, but I believe over a hundred thousand in revenue was picked up, so that, you know, there was quite a bit of enforcement. I think you're going to see more enforcement, principally again by local police and State Police.

It's pretty clear to me that it is dangerous as people get distracted, but I don't know that a bigger fine will increase enforcement. That's really the issue.

JOHN: And distraction is really the issue. I've seen a number of studies that have said that there's any number of ways to be distracted beyond having a cell phone to your ear with you hand. You could be talking on a cell phone using a hands-free device, you could be eating a sandwich, you could be talking to someone. There are many other levels of distraction. It seems as though that's one thing that seems to be singled out, and even though again as it's not been enforced as often as it's happening, it seems as though it's being singled out in a way that doesn't make a whole lot of sense given all the other distractions available to drivers.

BOB: I think it's singled out because it's new behavior. Cell phones are a relatively new phenomenon, and so people always on the phone in the car, first of all, it's very visible to every other driver so you know why they are distracted. If you see them driving a little bit erratically and you see the phone there, everybody knows that was the distraction as opposed to the kids that are making noise in the back seat or you are thinking about an important appointment that you are driving to and your mind has just drifted. So I think we focus on it because, A, we can see it and, B, it's new. We didn't used to have that distraction. There are other distractions that have been around for a long time, but talking on the phone while operating a car is a relatively new phenomenon.

JOHN: When we talk about licensing for drivers and maybe even going back and retesting older drivers, it seems as though there are so many things that have changed about what we do when we drive that maybe you need to have a wholesale look at this. For instance, you have much larger vehicles being driven by people who are just driving passenger vehicles, vehicles so large that they used to be commercial only, and now there's thousands of them on the road right next to each other. People driving with televisions or GPS devices on the dashboard, and of course the cell phone question. Any number of things.

Do you think that there is some role for the state DMV to take a look at this holistically, although it would cost a lot of money, and say, look, we have got to start testing people to encounter all these various things that they are doing? I mean, you tested me when I'm 16 years old but now I've got a whole new arsenal of things to distract me.

BOB: You raise some interesting points. It's not something I've given much thought to at this point, as to whether we ought to relook at testing altogether and what we should test for and the fact that you will be distracted in some ways. Although a couple of the laws the Legislature put in place clearly have helped with regard to new drivers. The statistics are very clear that as a brand new driver, if you have two or three extra people in the car with you, you are much more likely to be distracted and much more likely to get in an accident.

The statistics aren't as clear as to the hours that you drive the car. It's not necessarily more dangerous at 11:00 o'clock at night versus 3:00 in the afternoon. In fact, sometimes for teenage drivers 3:00 in the afternoon is the most dangerous time but that's because they are on the road then. That is because they are all leaving high school. But clearly, carrying those extra passengers, there are some things that the Legislature has done the Department is very supportive of because there is real evidence that it makes a difference.

JOHN: Let's go to Ray who is calling from Branford. Ray, go ahead, you're on *Where We Live*.

CALLER: First, I'm on a cell phone but I'm sitting parked in the parking lot of my office.

JOHN: Good for you Ray. Thank you.

CALLER: I'm a little concerned about what you were discussing about the positive ID requirements for reissuance of a license. I'm probably not atypical, but I'm 52 years old, I'm the chief information officer for a small company here in Branford. I'm married with two kids. For 35 years my driver's license has been my primary, if not my only form of identification. I was born in New Jersey but I don't really know where. I don't have any kind of a birth certificate, I don't have a passport. My parents have passed on. So if I went to DMV and they said, well, you need to provide an original birth certificate or you need to provide a passport in order to renew your license, what would I do?

BOB: Well, the first step is you know you were born in New Jersey but didn't know where, there may be some ways to go back into your records because you probably produced a birth certificate at some point to get your first license whether it was in New Jersey or somewhere else, whether it was a Connecticut license.

CALLER: I'm sure I did, but it was probably my mom who went with me to DMV and said, you know, here is Ray's birth certificate, please give him a license. But, you know, like I said, that was 35 years ago and I've moved maybe a dozen times to six or eight different states since then and the odds of being able to lay my hands on one are like nil.

BOB: Certainly that's something I need to listen to and we need to address, but it may be less difficult than you think to in fact track down a birth certificate. There is also a federal requirement that the states, although they have not gotten to that yet, create a statewide registry of birth certificates going back to all of the earlier birth certificates, so there may in fact be a system in place that would be easier for you to track down that original.

I would say to you you'll have a problem now if you ever choose to leave the country, you're going to need to find that to get a passport. So there's many reasons that most folks have to have at some point an access to a birth certificate. There are a few alternatives, but as a general rule you would need either a birth certificate or if you were born out of the country, it doesn't have to be a birth certificate but something that shows you are a naturalized citizen, something of that sort. So in certain circumstances there are other documents that will work.

JOHN: Ray, thank you very much for your phone call. I appreciate it. Let's go to Tom, who is also calling from Branford.

Tom, go ahead. You're on *Where We Live*.

CALLER: Hi, Bob. I'm a commissioner of the Branford Parks and Open Space Commission. We've got 1,200-odd acres of land that we manage. One of the big problems is ATVs running along on the trails causing all of the problems that ATVs cause. Your Department has the right to require all of these ATVs to register with the Department, there are only -- there are less than 3,000 ATVs registered currently in this state as of January, right? There are reported to be 60, 70 thousand ATVs owned in this state.

The big problem with ATVs from a landowner's point of view is that nobody can enforce, nobody can identify the ATV because there seems to be just widespread abuse or noncompliance with the requirement that ATVs register.

JOHN: And from what I understand the registration is necessary if you are going to ride it anywhere other than on private property. Clearly it seems unlikely that 70 thousand people are riding only in their own backyards.

CALLER: Yes, it's a case of -- it's not a case of a few bad apples, it's a case of 95% of the ATV use is not on -- is on somebody else's property in an improper fashion.

JOHN: Well, let's see if we can get some comment from Bob Ward.

BOB: That's certainly not an issue that I'm on top of as I sit here today. I do know that the registration requirement is strictly if you want to operate it other than on your own private property. I don't doubt --

CALLER: There is only one place in Connecticut where you can legally ride if, you know, if it's not your friend's property or your own property.

JOHN: Sure. Yeah, hold one for one second, Tom. I'll just let Bob finish.

BOB: I was going to say, clearly there are lots of people operating that are probably in violation. That is certainly a law enforcement issue. I don't really have a position at this point. You've asked me a new and interesting question of whether we ought to require them all to have the equivalent of a license plate so they are easier to identify even if they really aren't suitable to operate on the road, but generally we only license vehicles with the intent that they be operated on the highways.

JOHN: And Tom, thank you very much for your phone call. I appreciate it. And there is a fairly strong ATV lobby at the state Legislature that I'm sure you recognize, including many members of the state Legislature who are ATV riders themselves.

BOB: Certainly there are a lot of conflicting interests in this regard, and at least at this point it's probably not high on my priority list in terms of relicensing of ATVs with some of the other public safety issues. I think with safety issues it would rise to the top of my list, but I wouldn't close my mind to that. Clearly if the Legislature wanted us to require all of them to be licensed they would have passed that law. So I don't see us getting into the middle of that issue at the moment with some higher priority items on public safety.

JOHN: Certainly. Let's go quickly to Dorothy who is calling from Litchfield. Dorothy, go ahead. You're on *Where We Live*.

CALLER: Hi. Thanks for taking my call.

JOHN: You're welcome.

CALLER: I was listening earlier. I didn't hear the whole hour, but I was listening earlier when you were talking about retesting elderly people was a concern for safety on the

road, but I wonder if the Commissioner could tell us which age group has the most risk for causing casualties on the road, because the last time I looked at those statistics it was young men between the ages of like 16 and 25. Is that correct still?

BOB: Well, certainly you have to look at miles driven and that sort of thing. Actually I had heard a report recently that women over 80 who are involved in more fatal accidents for the miles driven than in any other category. That number surprised me and I haven't seen proof of it, so I don't know if that's true or not, but I did hear that as a report.

We have tried to address, although we certainly haven't solved the problem with regard to younger drivers with both a graduated license, restricting the hours you can drive, restricting the passengers, so we have tried to address the teenage issue. And I'm not trying to pick on seniors but I think we do need to recognize that when you first test your skills at age 16, they might change by age 75 or 85.

CALLER: I think they change. I'm 55, and I can tell you they change, but your wisdom also changes and most older people modify their driving to their loss of ability. In other words, you must hear people all the time, they don't drive the highway anymore because they realize the cars go too fast, or they don't drive at night because they have night vision. So many, many elderly people do modify their driving habits as they age because they recognize their loss of ability. But I just think it's the younger, you know, again, I haven't heard this women over 80 causing more accidents, but I do frequently hear about teenagers causing casualties. So I just think we need to look at the whole spectrum and not just the people over age 70.

JOHN: Well, Dorothy, thank you very much for your phone call.

CALLER: You're welcome.

JOHN: Something that's come up that I wanted to ask you about, there's been a rash of wrong-way driving accidents. These were people getting onto the highway going the opposite direction. Some of this is clearly a DOT function. Maybe it's a signage problem, but it seems as though they come in droves where people are getting onto

the Connecticut highways on on ramps going the wrong direction. I'm not exactly sure why this is happening or what anybody can do about it.

BOB: Of course in a couple of those I've seen somebody has been charged with drunk driving also.

JOHN: Yes.

BOB: And so the best road signs in the world don't work if you are drunk and driving, and frankly one of our other roles at DMV is to enforce the drunk driving laws and specifically make sure your license is suspended in a prompt, quick per se hearing. And I'm glad you raised the question that way because I want people to understand that system is working pretty well now, and if you are picked up on a DWI you are going to lose your license and we are going to keep track of you and we are going to prosecute you if you should drive while under suspension.

JOHN: And you feel as though -- do you have to do anything to further strengthen the DUI, DWI requirements at this point?

BOB: Prior to my getting there some important steps were taken. The one thing we want to add to it is to add a hearings representative to be sure that, if you will, there is a prosecutor in all of those hearings. There's not always a prosecutor in the hearings. Now there's an employee that presents some information, but we think in some of the cases we need to add a prosecutor to it.

JOHN: We're running low on time. I just want to get to one last phone call. We have Kingsley who is calling from Norwich. Kingsley, if you could be brief? Hello? Kingsley? I'm sorry, you know what, Kingsley I think is listening to the radio in the background and we'll have to get to him again next time. He's a fairly regular caller to the program.

With just a little bit of time left that we have, Bob, I'm wondering if you see any other challenges moving forward in this job, again that you haven't really foreseen, that you are going to try to take on in the next few months as you move forward.

BOB: I think our biggest challenge is service and specifically technology. The Department right now, its information systems are 20 and 30 years old. Governor Rell has supported over \$50 million to be spent to revamp all of our technology so that you can get into our office, get your business done and get out promptly. So it's the challenge of using information technology in an effective way.

JOHN: Bob Ward is the new Commissioner of the State Department of Motor Vehicles. Bob Ward, thank you very much for coming back to join us here on *Where We Live*.

BOB: It's a pleasure to be with you.

(End of Interview.)