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Voters could tell drivers to hang up

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PHOENIX — Arizona voters may get a chance to do what state lawmakers will not: Keep motorists who are holding their cell phones from trying to steer the car at the same time.

An initiative drive launched Wednesday would make it illegal for drivers to talk on their phones unless they are using a hand-free headset. Violators would be subject to a \$100 fine; increasing to \$200 if the motorist is in an accident.

Organizers have until July 3, 2008, to gather 153,365 valid signatures to put the issue on the 2008 general election ballot.

The drive is spearheaded by Bonita Burks, a resident of Maricopa who has some political background. She ran — unsuccessfully — for justice of the peace last year.

"It's based on my personal experience," she said. That includes carpooling every day and watching other motorists.

Among the concerns she observed, she said, were, "going off into another lane other than their own, or they're driving subsequently a lot slower, or a lot faster," she said.

Burks said the effort doesn't currently have a lot of cash, something she hopes will change when the group puts up its Web site this weekend and solicits donations.

If the plan makes the ballot, it will generate some well-financed opposition from the cell-phone industry which has successfully killed repeated legislative efforts to impose similar restrictions.

Susan Bitter Smith, who lobbies for the companies, said all advise customers to use phones responsibly. But she said cell-phone use is no more a hazard or distraction than other things like changing the station on the car radio to eating a hamburger.

Burks said even if that is true — something she does not concede — this measure is "one step" to make roads safer. "I don't claim to fix all," she said.

A 2005 study by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety concluded that motorists who chat while cruising are four times as likely to get injured in accidents.

But that study also concluded that using a hands-free device — instead of holding the phone — did not reduce the frequency of accidents. The study's author said that may show that distraction, rather than having the phone in a hand, is to blame.

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