

Beacon Hill Byline

November 10,2004

Election Day Survey

Last week I conducted an informal survey of the district – last Tuesday, to be precise. On Election Day I stood at the north end of Longmeadow Street during the morning rush hour with my “Vote today” sign.

Simply watching the cars go by and trying to identify the drivers kept me occupied for the first hour, but it’s really hard to see people through windshield reflections. Soon I decided that I needed more mental exercise. So I decided to use the time to check out the driving habits of the occupants of the passing cars. Perhaps the driver eating a banana breakfast on the way to work first activated my curiosity.

The survey was actually a continuation of similar assessments I have made during other campaign seasons. Now, as then, seat belt usage was the only habit I was seriously interested in checking. I was not monitoring anyone for drinking coffee and talking on the phone while turning the corner.

Seat belt usage has long been accompanied by controversy in our state. Even though other states have mandated seat belt usage without objection from voters, Massachusetts acted more like our “Live free or die” neighbors to the north.

Perhaps the problems started when the legislature was one of the first in the nation to pass a law requiring seat belt usage. People did not like it. Voters waged a strong referendum campaign to repeal the law, a campaign energized by a former Boston radio talk show host. And the law was repealed.

Massachusetts may have been the only state to post highway signs that *suggest* you wear your seat belt.

As time passed, seat belt usage became a national priority. The federal government could not require us to pass a new law, so it used its fiscal power to deny highway money to Massachusetts until such a law was in place. The legislature revisited the issue and passed a new seat belt mandate in the ‘90s, and this time the repeal vote failed. Seat belts must now be worn. The exception is that a motorist cannot be stopped simply for failure to comply. There must be another infraction to justify an officer in stopping a car.

That background information explains my interest in seat belts. As a strong believer in their safety, especially now that cars have airbags, I wanted to see if motorists are complying with a law that cannot be enforced. And they are.

One morning’s observation says Longmeadow commuters buckle up. It looked to me like 80% to 90% of drivers had seat belts fastened, a higher percentage than I’ve seen in other years.

I will admit that the several dogs that occupied passenger seats by did not appear to be belted in, but the babies were secured. We have not yet required pet seat belts, but they do exist.

Thanks to those of you who waved or honked when you saw me. On a cold morning, your smiles help keep me warm.