

SUBJECT: Standards for vehicle headlights

COMMITTEE: Transportation — favorable, with amendment

VOTE: 7 ayes — Alexander, Siebert, Edwards, Finnell, Hawley, Hill, Pickett

0 nays — None

2 absent — Hartnett, Uher

WITNESSES: For — Bud McMullen, General Motors Corporation

Against — None

BACKGROUND : The Transportation Code requires certain equipment on motor vehicles operated on Texas public roads and specifies that motor vehicles must be equipped with at least two headlamps.

DIGEST: HB 1791, as amended, would prohibit operation of a motor vehicle equipped with an unapproved lamp or light.

An unapproved lamp or light would be one that was not part of the vehicle maker's original equipment; was not expressly required or permitted to be installed or displayed under existing law; or was not specified by a standard or recommended practice of the Society of Automotive Engineers. The bill would specifically prohibit a person from operating or moving equipment or a vehicle, other than a police vehicle, with a blue beacon, flashing or alternating light.

HB 1791 would also stipulate that the two headlamps required of vehicles must emit white light, and that a motor vehicle could not be equipped with a headlamp cover that alters the color of the light or reduces its intensity.

The bill would take effect September 1, 1997.

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SUPPORTERS SAY: HB 1791 would assist police and other emergency vehicle drivers, as well as the general public, by banning the use of certain types of alternate lighting equipment on cars. Such lighting is distracting for other drivers and can create very hazardous conditions. For example, the headlight covers or tinted film that some vehicle owners use to alter the color of their headlights make the headlamp far less visible, especially in bad weather, or distort the light to give other motorists an inaccurate impression of the distance of an approaching vehicle.

Use of blue, pink or amber lighting or other customized lighting devices on passenger autos and trucks has become far more common over the last two decades, creating identification problems. HB 1791 would allow only police vehicles to use the blue lighting that is common to many emergency vehicles and would restrict to them the use of blue flashing or alternating lights. This would prevent vehicles operated by regular citizens from being confused for emergency vehicles and help minimize dangers on Texas highways.

OPPONENTS SAY: HB 1791 would unfairly burden the motoring public with regulations that restrict their personal freedom of expression. No reliable evidence has been offered proving that use of certain customized lighting devices by motorists has resulted in more dangerous roads or traffic conditions. In fact, it could be suggested that some of the neon-style devices currently in use on autos and pick-ups actually help illuminate the license plate and other identifying features of the vehicles, rather than conceal them, making such vehicles far easier for the police to spot and identify.

NOTES: The committee amendment would allow for lamps or lights specified by a standard or recommended practice of the Society of Automotive Engineers.