

Editorial: Repeal license law

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By: Herald Staff

Public safety in the commonwealth is hardly served when we place unnecessary obstacles before offenders leaving jail or prison — the key word being “unnecessary.” A bill before the Senate that would repeal the automatic suspension of driver’s licenses for individuals convicted of drug offenses — when the crimes were unrelated to driving — deserves passage by the full Legislature.

The bill is no get-out-of-jail-free card. It wouldn’t apply to individuals convicted of driving under the influence. It is, rather, a reasonable effort to eliminate a costly hurdle that some ex-prisoners face when they return to the community (as most do).

A suspended license — and the \$500 cost they must pay to reinstate it — is a high hurdle for some to clear. It makes it difficult to get to a job, get to drug counseling appointments or pick up the kids from school. And for those who *are* intent on returning to a life of crime, does anyone really believe a suspended license serves as an impediment?

More than 30 states have repealed similar automatic suspension laws, which date to the late 1980s, when the federal government tied highway funding to passage. Supporters say it can be repealed without risking future funding, and repeal has broad support, including from the Massachusetts District Attorneys Association. A judge would still have the discretion to issue a license suspension, depending on the circumstances of a case.

The legislation as written is not without flaws, and should be amended to correct them. Lawmakers should delete the section that would wipe the record clean for anyone whose license was previously suspended under the law. The law was the law for a quarter-century, and if an individual’s license was lawfully suspended during that period it should not be whitewashed.

Similarly, the bill would allow a person whose license was suspended as the result of a default warrant, or because of child support delinquency, to wipe *their* suspensions from the books. That section needs to go, too. But the main goal of the legislation is reasonable and deserves enactment.

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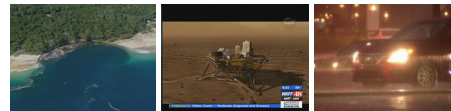
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