

[Print this article](#) | [Go back](#)

Thursday, January 24, 2008

THE INDIANA LEGISLATURE

50-cent vehicle fee would fund brain-injury research

Bill would end \$10 charge for motorcycle owners

By **Lesley Stedman Weidenbener**
lstedman@courier-journal.com
The Courier-Journal

By **Lesley Stedman Weidenbener**
lstedman@courier-journal.com
The Courier-Journal

INDIANAPOLIS -- The cost of research for spinal cord and traumatic brain injuries would be borne by all vehicle owners -- not just those with motorcycles -- under legislation the cleared a House committee yesterday.

House Bill 1318 would eliminate a controversial \$10 fee that lawmakers added to motorcycle registrations last year, infuriating bikers who complained it's unfair to single them out to pay for a problem that has many causes.

As amended and approved by the House Roads and Transportation Committee, HB 1318 adds 50 cents to the registration cost of all vehicles. The bill now moves to the full House.

"This is a much better idea," said Lynn Brown of Lucerne, who came to the Statehouse yesterday with dozens of other motorcycle owners to protest the \$10 fee and support the bill. "This doesn't discriminate against bikers."

The proposed 50-cent fee would generate about \$2.8 million for the Spinal Cord and Brain Injury Fund, which was created by last year's legislation. That's nearly \$1.2 million more annually than the motorcycle fee was expected to generate.

The fund is managed by a nine-member board that will provide grants for research and programs as well as a surveillance registry to track those injuries in Indiana.

Rep. Carolene Mays, D-Indianapolis, who pushed last year's legislation and is the author of HB 1318, said the grants will help the state pursue a share of \$50 million in federal research funding for the injuries.

An estimated 160,000 Hoosiers suffer from traumatic spinal cord or brain injuries.

Annette Seabrook, therapy manager for the spinal cord injury program at the Rehabilitation Hospital of Indiana, told the committee that too many patients must leave Indiana to seek treatment. That's because other states -- including Kentucky -- fund the kinds of research and programs that make cutting-edge treatments available, she said.

"It can improve recovery, it can affect medical complications, it can affect lifelong pain and depression that they may live with," Seabrook said. "It can help return them to the community and to the workforce."

Darcy Keith, who suffered a brain injury in a traffic accident in 1991 while she was a student at Ball State University, tearfully told the committee that appropriate therapy and care can allow victims to lead productive lives.

"By God's grace I have had a remarkable recovery -- not only due to God, but I was lifelined to the University of Cincinnati hospital, which was a research hospital, and that research aided in that recovery," Keith said.

But yesterday's hearing was more about how to pay for such research than whether it is needed.

Last year, Mays pushed a bill that would have increased fines for traffic violations to pay for the fund, but that plan was amended in a committee to also raise the motorcycle registration fee.

Later, the entire proposal was amended into the state budget, where it was changed several times in the session's waning days. In the final budget plan, fiscal leaders stripped out the increased fines for traffic violations, leaving only the motorcycle language and the provisions creating the spinal cord fund.

The provision initially went unnoticed by ABATE of Indiana, a group that advocates for motorcyclists and pushes bike safety, and Gov. Mitch Daniels, who rides a motorcycle.

"Nobody even knew this was buried in the budget," the governor told The Associated Press some weeks after signing the bill into law. "I didn't. They didn't."

Bikers, though, were furious. ABATE urged motorcycle owners to register their bikes early -- before the law took effect July 1 -- and started lobbying to eliminate the fee.

Mays was happy to oblige, saying yesterday that she still didn't know why motorcycles were singled out.

In her introduced version of HB 1318 this year, the motorcycle fee would have been eliminated and replaced by an \$8 increase in fines for some traffic offenses. Mays said she chose those infractions because motor vehicle accidents account for about 44 percent of all spinal cord and brain injuries.

But committee members were concerned that those fines already are getting too high.

"When do you reach a time when someone can't pay the fine?" asked Rep. Vern Tincher, D-Terre Haute. "You take food off the table, I guess."

So committee members adopted the amendment to add 50 cents to all vehicle registrations. According to the nonpartisan Legislative Services Agency, there are 5.6 million registrations annually.

Larry Johns, a biker from Delphi, said he thinks that's a much better choice than saddling motorcycle owners with the cost.

"Bikers shouldn't have to pay the majority of the cost for this fund," said Johns, who was waiting outside the committee room during the discussion. "I'm real happy they did this."

Reporter Lesley Stedman Weidenbener can be reached at (317) 444-2780.

Print this article | Go back