For older drivers, state is the worst place to be

By Diane C. Lade, Staff writer
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Florida needs to get ready for when baby boomers hit the road as senior drivers, according to a new study that found the Sunshine State had the most drivers age 65 and older killed in traffic accidents.

Senior crash rates could get worse, as the huge boomer population is expected to live longer and stay behind the wheel longer than previous generations, safety advocates said. State officials estimate that by 2030, one in four Florida drivers will be 65 or older.

The "Keeping Baby Boomers Mobile" report just released by TRIP a national transportation research group, looked at 2010 federal statistics. It found that 271 Florida senior drivers died in accidents that year, and that 503 crash fatalities of all ages involved senior drivers. These totals are higher than in any other state — including California, which has the most 65-plus drivers nationwide, about 3.1 million. That's about a half million more than Florida.

The numbers show communities need to push for better designed roadways, better driver testing and transportation alternatives, according to Floridians for Better Transportation, a safe highways advocacy group composed of businesses, road builders and engineers.

President Matthew Ubben said projections estimate Florida will gain 5 million residents in the next 20 years, with half of them older than 60. "A lot of them will be retirees new to Florida, people who are used to driving in a different [state]," he said.

His organization is lobbying legislators to return $417 million in license tag and title revenues, diverted to the general budget, to the transportation trust fund.

The TRIP report did not address why California, a state with more older drivers, would have fewer senior fatalities. Several highway safety experts didn't have an answer, although Ubben said Florida's seniors might drive more.

Fran Carlin-Rogers, an Orlando senior transportation consultant, said California had been spending a lot on updating its highways and had instituted a tiered licensing system for older drivers. "But how that might play into these crash statistics, I can't guess," she said.

Florida consistently ranks high in senior crash deaths on national surveys, mainly because it has a lot of seniors. There now are 2.7 million licensed Florida drivers older than 65, about 20 percent of the total.

But the TRIP report found Texas had the highest per-capita senior driver death rate when population was factored in, a trend echoed in other studies through the years. There were 10.7 deaths per 100,000 licensed drivers older than 65 in the Lone Star state, compared with 9.87 in Florida and 6.9 in California.

Gail Holley, the Florida Department of Transportation's Safe Mobility for Life manager, said she was glad the report examined proposals like offering seniors ways to get around without their cars and developing elder-friendly vehicles, rather than focusing on stricter older driver licensing or better traffic signs.

"Older driver safety is about improving quality of life, not just roadways and licensing," Holley said.

To see the TRIP report, go to tripnet.org.

For older driver resources near you, go to safeandmobileseniors.org.