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Aging drivers nearing risky fork in road

By Allan Turner

At 74, Dan Grundstrom goes on high alert when he eases himself behind the steering wheel of his new Chevy Impala. Houston streets are filled with hazards: non-signaling lane-changers, cars zooming out of driveways and, worst of all, kids darting into traffic.

"If they'd just keep these old farts off the road," he sputtered, "we wouldn't have anything to worry about."

Grundstrom's worries likely will increase as baby boomers cruise into their golden years. Drivers 65 and older now constitute about 14 percent of Texas' motoring public - a percentage that is expected to increase to 20 percent in little more than a decade.

A study released Wednesday by TRIP, an industry-financed transportation research group, and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials found that, while senior drivers account for 8 percent of American miles driven, they rack up 17 percent of fatal accidents. In Texas in 2010, senior drivers were involved in 397 fatal accidents; 224 of them died.

Only Florida had more senior-related deadly crashes and senior deaths.

The study, "Keeping Baby Boomers Mobile: Preserving the Mobility and Safety of Older Americans," offers suggestions for improving roadway infrastructure and for helping older motorists.

"Our goal in the report is to keep older drivers as mobile as possible for as long as possible," said TRIP spokeswoman Carolyn Bonifas.

"That could involve alternative means of transportation - public transportation, ride-sharing, more-involved family - and making driving environments as safe and forgiving as possible."

The recommendations include upgrading roadways by installing brighter lighting, especially at intersections; widening or adding left-turn lanes and increasing the length of highway merge lanes and exits; increasing the width of highway dividing stripes and putting up simpler signs.

Road improvements

In Texas, Department of Transportation spokeswoman Karen Amacker said her agency has added highway shoulders, installed more reflective highway signs, improved lettering on signs and placed barriers between opposing traffic lanes.

Texas AAA spokeswoman Sarah Schimmer said mobility is "critical for maintaining independence and a connection to community."

"Half of the non-drivers 65 and older stay home," she said. "As you age, your physical abilities can decline. But just because you have some physical limitations doesn't mean you can't drive safely."

Older drivers, she said, should get regular physical and eye exams, learn about side-effects of their medications and avoid heavy commuter traffic and driving at night.

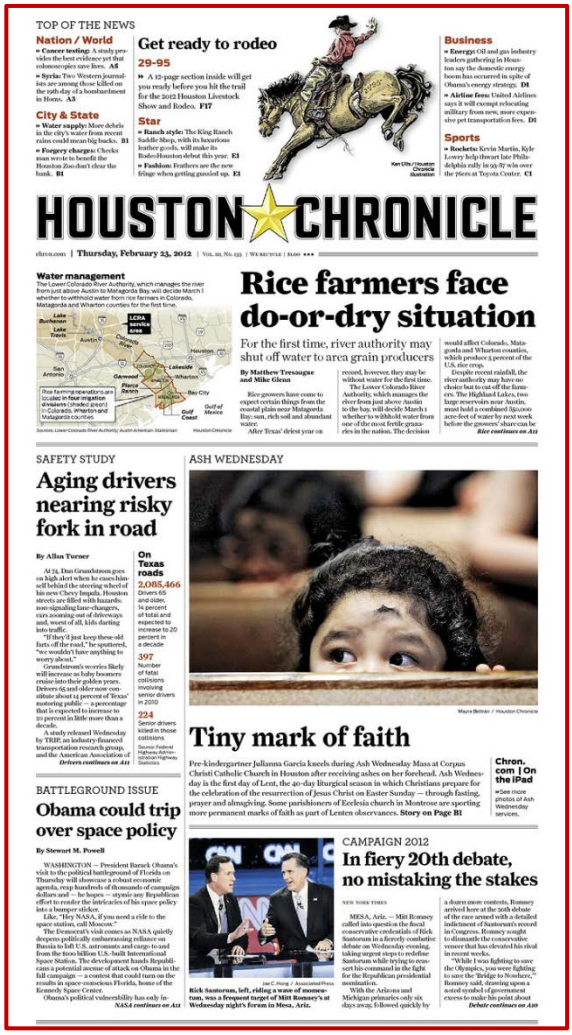
Grundstrom said he has accommodated his growing years by exercising extra caution.

"I wait extra time at stops," he said. "I lean forward to see through blind spots on both sides."

Schimmer said that when it becomes apparent that seniors no longer can drive safely, their families should have a "family talk" to discuss alternatives.

"Sometimes seniors won't know their limitations," she said. "They want to maintain their independence. The best thing a family can do is sit down and have a conversation before things reach that stage. Develop a game plan. It's like dealing with teenagers - you need to establish rules and restrictions."

allan.turner@chron.com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