

NAAFA NEWSLETTER

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION TO AID FAT AMERICANS, INC.

P.O. BOX 745

WESTBURY, N.Y. 11590

Volume III

OCTOBER, 1973

Issue No. 1

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BUCKLE UP OR ELSE!

NEWS ITEM: MANY STATES ARE EITHER CONSIDERING, OR ARE ON THE VERGE OF PASSING, LEGISLATION MAKING THE WEARING OF AUTOMOTIVE SEAT BELTS MANDATORY, WITH VIOLATIONS PUNISHIBLE WITH FINES UP TO \$25.

Special Seat Belt Issue

ONE MEMBER'S VIEW

by

Natalie Clist

In a recent article in the Wall Street Journal, "Buckle Up or Else", there was a discussion of plans in different states to pass laws requiring Americans to fasten their seat belts or pay a fine of \$25 per offense.

Doctors hail the move as a way to save lives, but some people feel that such laws would be an invasion of privacy and a violation of the rights of the individual. Of course, each citizen is entitled to his or her own opinion.

The New York Daily News had a small piece which said that New York could possibly be the first state in the country to pass such a law.

I agree that seat belts seem to be a necessary item in the car, but when they don't fit around you, there is certainly no way you can use them! I don't think that the larger-than-average driver should be fined because of his or her size, so I decided to see what I could do about the situation here in New York.

Since I happen to live in Nassau County, I called their Traffic Safety Board and explained my problem. They suggested that I contact Senator John Caemmerer as he is the sponsor of the seat belt legislation in New York State.

The Senator's secretary said that the senator was of considerable size himself and was familiar with the problem; and that he had already been in touch with the "motor vehicle people" (the Department of Motor Vehicles) to do something to correct the discrepancy in the proposed law. She said she would speak to the Senator, and that he would be in touch with me.

After a week or two, the senator's

aide called me and said that they had not realized that there was anyone that the belt would not fit around! However, we shouldn't worry, he said, because in their infinite wisdom, the lawmakers had provided an exception in the bill to allow for disabled citizens, and therefore we could easily obtain a DOCTOR'S CERTIFICATE (!) stating that we have a physical disability; or a note from the Commissioner of Motor Vehicles excusing us from the law.

Based on the above response, I do not feel that I have found a satisfactory answer to the problem. Suppose the Doctor refuses to issue such a note, feeling that now he has one more tool with which to compel me to lose weight? Suppose the COMMISSIONER is prejudiced against fat people, and doesn't feel like issuing such notes or permits? Will the state have to set up a special department, complete with scales and tape measures to determine which drivers and/or passengers may be exempted from the law? Or will it be left up to the individual discretion (or discrimination) of the policeman on his beat?

Maybe if they would cut down on "Horsepower" in the car, it wouldn't be so necessary to have "Hold-power".

THE SEAT BELT QUANDARY

by

Judy Freespirit
Sec'y, Los Angeles Chapter

I'm boiling mad. For months now, I have been trying to get seat belts long enough to fit me, or to find some kind of belt extender like they have on airplanes. I've asked suppliers around town and gotten nothing but blank stares and smiles of amusement. I've contacted several

(continued on page 2)

seat belt manufacturers, and they say that they make a long size for trucks, but couldn't tell me where I could buy them, and they don't sell to the public!

Even the National Safety Council was of no help. Since they advertise on radio and TV about the importance of "buckling up for safety", I phoned their Los Angeles office to seek assistance on how fat people could take their advice, when there seems to be only small belts in cars... I was told that this was not their concern. They could not tell manufacturers what to do; they could only advertise the need for safety belts - that's all, ma'am.

It is obvious that our lives are considered less worth saving than those of "normal" sized Americans - if, indeed, our lives are even considered at all. There appears to be no limit to the punishment meted out against those of us who deviate from the norm.

I intend to continue my search for larger seat belts. If anyone has any information on where to get them, or would like to assist me in the fight, please contact me.

(Reprinted from 3/73 L.A. - NAAFA NEWS, Box 1021, Pasadena, CA 91102)

(ED. NOTE: Those with useful information are also encouraged to drop a note to the national office in Westbury, telling us how you can help or just what you know!)

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Bill Fabrey

WHY CAN'T THE SEAT BELT PROBLEM BE RESOLVED?



It looks as if it may take two to five years for members of NAAFA to see an improvement in the problem of seat belts in cars. The reasons are not so much a conspiracy on the part of auto manufacturers, but primarily for economic and technical reasons.

Why do I sound so pessimistic, when many of you may remember that NAAFA has for two years been considering the possibility of having seat belt extenders manufactured, and made available to members? To answer that question, let me take some time to explain how I became interested in the problem.

INTEREST BEGAN IN 1962

When I traded my motorcycle for a car in 1962, I became concerned that I and passengers in my car be safely protected by seat belts. Granted, there were some kinds of accidents in which seat belts offered little protection. However, in 1962 studies showed that, on the average, for those wearing seat belts, injuries were reduced and chances of survival were improved.

In 1962, no cars came originally equipped with seat belts. Certainly my 1959 Rambler American had none. Then the Chevron chain of service stations came out with its offer of seat belts installed for \$5.95 each. They were good quality belts, well-installed, and their extra-long length (to fit any car) combined with my small Rambler, with a short seat-to-floor distance, gave ample belt length to fit anyone.

BOUGHT SEAT BELTS AGAIN IN 1964

In 1964 I switched to a '63 Valiant, again with no belts factory installed. Chevron had discontinued installing seat belts, and I had to re-investigate sources of supply. A Consumer Reports article gave high ratings to all belts manufactured by the American Safety Equipment Corp., including a deluxe model sold under the name "Hickok" - the model RT-1970.

A call to the company revealed that they were willing to make a special set of belts for my car, but that the RT-1970 model belts were very long, and might do the job. Some comparative measurements showed me that the length of the RT-1970 would be ample.

SITUATION WORSE IN 1968

I had reason to look into the situation again in 1968, and found to my dismay that it had become very hard to buy any "replacement" belts that could be installed in any old car. Since by that time most cars on the road had factory-installed belts, the market for "universal-type" belts such as I wanted had all but disappeared. This situation is even worse today, and replacement belts are very hard to find, in any length.

NAAFA FORMED TO OVERCOME SIZE PROBLEMS

When NAAFA was formed, one of its several goals was to improve the safety and well-being of fat people. In our minds was the idea that problems of sheer physical dimensions went beyond clothing; for many, it included theater seats, turnstiles, office furniture, and SEAT BELTS. All of these problems were (and are) created by a society geared for those of average dimensions. Last year we polled NAAFA members to determine how many would find seat-belt extenders useful. About 40% of those responding were interested.

This year, the issue has become much more important in the light of proposed legislation to require drivers to use belts.

THE PRIMARY ISSUES

In the current seat-belt "crisis" there are several issues at hand:

- 1) Whether the states should have the right to require the use of seat belts;
- 2) Whether, once such laws are passed, a policeman, an auto commissioner, or a judge should be placed in the position of deciding whether a fat person is "justifiably exempt" from the law by virtue of a "handicap" or other reasoning;
- 3) Whether it is technically and economically possible to manufacture seat belts or belt extenders that fit anyone;
- 4) Whether Detroit manufacturers should be required to furnish such seat belts;
- 5) Whether an organized group or lobby of fat people would be helpful at this time.

ARE SUCH LAWS CONSTITUTIONAL

Although many of us resent laws governing our use of safety devices designed for our own protection, historically the state has often passed laws governing the safety of its citizens. For example, laws banning unsafe food additives or drugs.

No matter how loudly we proclaim that our privacy would be violated, proponents of seat belt legislation will argue that excess injuries and fatalities caused by the lack of seat belt use are harmful to society as a whole; that we hurt more than our own selves by not using belts; or so at least it can be claimed.

We must face the fact that such laws will come into effect in many states, and will probably not be declared unconstitutional.

WHO SHOULD DECIDE WHETHER A FAT PERSON IS EXEMPT

Seat belt laws would be hard to enforce; if a driver is stopped and examined, who is not wearing belts due to physical size, what will probably happen in most cases is that the policeman will see the evidence before his very eyes, and will not issue a summons. If the officer is unreasonable, or has a gripe against fat people, the matter could come before traffic court. Many fat people would doubtless be tempted to plead guilty and pay the fine, rather than plead innocent by virtue of size and inability to meet the law's requirements. To plead innocent means to subject oneself to the examination of the court

In some states, if the law is vague on the subject of who is exempted, and if the judge is prejudiced against fat people, the proceedings in the court could become very humiliating. Hopefully, such cases will be very rare indeed.

ARE "UNIVERSAL" SEAT BELTS TECHNICALLY AND ECONOMICALLY POSSIBLE TO BUILD

For safety and insurance reasons, many NAAFA members would prefer the partial protection that a seat belt offers, whether or not the law requires it. So I recently contacted the American Safety Equipment Corp. in Encino, California, and held an informative interview with a Mr. Bradford, who is Vice-President of Corporate Development. His primary function is to act as a liason between the company and various groups, especially safety-certifying organizations in the state and federal governments.

Naturally, as the major manufacturer of auto and aircraft seat belts, American Safety's position is that increased use of belts is desirable. However, since belts are presently required in all cars, the company would not necessarily stand to gain by laws requiring their use. I felt that Mr. Bradford was quite open-minded in his outlook, especially considering his position with the company. He seemed familiar with the problems involving those who are either too large or too small for the average belt.

My interview with American Safety convinced me of something I had suspected for a long time: that it may not be possible to build conventional seat belts, as we now know them, that will fit everyone. At the very least, a successful lap and shoulder-harness installation to fit a very large person has to be custom-made and installed, and cannot be made so that it can be adjusted to fit much thinner drivers or passengers. Matters such as buckle positioning and the inter-relationship between lap belt and shoulder harness length and positioning pose engineering difficulties.

Even a longer lap belt alone is a problem, as Detroit long ago built shielded belt retractors that will accommodate only so much belt, and no more. Although it is possible that Detroit could invest more money and come up with broader designs, naturally the cost would be passed on to the sceptical consumer.

CAN NAAFA HAVE EXTENDERS MADE

Can belt extenders be designed and produced for NAAFA members and others? Yes, but at a cost that may not be worthwhile. For example, American Safety could produce such extensions made to order for around \$10-\$25, but the buckle and webbing design would be different depending on the make of car. For NAAFA to make available the six models required to fit just the last two model years of Ford, Chrysler, and American Motors (not including GM or any foreign makes) would require an initial investment of \$100-\$200 for design, and about \$3000 for testing to show compliance with state and federal standards.

(continued on page 4)

NAAFA intends to apply to the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (Equipment Approval Division) and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, both in Washington, D.C., for a waiver of these tests, to bring such belts within the reach of NAAFA members. In an effort to protect the people, our bureaucratic government has made it economically impossible for an individual to order a simple device like a seat belt extender!

SHOULD DETROIT BE REQUIRED BY LAW TO BUILD MORE UNIVERSAL BELTS

Naturally, we would like to see the car manufacturers forced to provide seat belts ample enough to fit our members. But is this really the position we should take? Even though Detroit has nominally complied with laws affecting safety and the consumer, it usually does so half-heartedly, and makes the "improvement" so unattractive and impractical that many wish that the manufacturers had been left alone. Example: shoulder harnesses that are so restraining that few people use them. Another example: emission control systems that are so costly of fuel that the nation's gasoline shortage is worsened.

Some governmental regulation seems essential in the area of safety; automobile manufacturers cannot be trusted to act in the interest of the consumer, since that simply is not the purpose of any normal corporation. This is neither good nor bad, but must be taken into consideration. The pressure of public opinion would ideally persuade manufacturers to make safety devices that would be usable by all the people. However, most car buyers do not care if seat belts are made larger, especially when it would in some way increase the price of their car!

WOULD AN ORGANIZED LOBBY OF FAT PEOPLE BE HELPFUL AT THIS TIME

It is open to question whether such a lobby might help. A vocal minority might tend to influence legislators to some extent; it would probably not affect manufacturers in Detroit.

As far as NAAFA is concerned, its direct participation in a political lobby is illegal. The same laws that allow us the same tax-exempt status enjoyed by other charitable and educational institutions, prohibit us from trying to directly influence legislation. This may come as a shock to those NAAFA members who want strong, even radical political action. However, there is nothing to stop individual members, acting on their own, from writing or calling politicians, governmental committees, and manufacturers. I am certainly in favor of taking a strong stand wherever it is really in the interest of NAAFA members to do so. And, a few well-placed, well-written letters sometimes do more than political strong-arm

tactics. Not always, but sometimes.

In any event, I don't think lobbying would be very useful at this time, except possibly on the local level.

WHAT, THEN, IS THE ANSWER

I am coming to believe that passive restraint systems, like seat belts, padding cannot be taken much further. Already, for example, the inflatable air bag is saving lives in test cars, some of which are now in the hands of the public. Even head-on collisions can be survived using such bags. Best of all, the size of the occupant is no problem in the operation of the bags. Designed to inflate automatically upon impact, the bags are required by present law to be standard equipment in 1976 and later model cars. Recently, GM announced that, starting in 1974, air bags will be offered as an optional replacement for the standard belts, in full-size GM cars. Of course, the catch is that they will cost about \$150 more than cars equipped with belts.

My hopes rest on these air bags and other future alternatives to seat belts. The public, which has in the past disliked using belts, is expected to prefer bags. For that reason, any energy we spend fighting seat belt legislation, politicians, and manufacturers may be wasted energy. Let's use it more constructively elsewhere.

THIS HAS BEEN A SPECIAL ISSUE OF THE NEWS-LETTER. REGULAR FEATURES WILL REAPPEAR NEXT MONTH.

ARTICLES COMING SOON

- Interview with Dr. Natalie Allon
- CONVENTION '73
- Personal interview with "Bridget"
- "The Right to be Fat" by Gabriel Laub
- LETTERS
- Pen Pal Report by Ira Cohen
- NAAFA-DATE statistics
- Poems
- Report on Advisory Board
by Dr. Ethel Weiss-Shed
- 1974 HILDA preview

NOTICE TO ALL NAAFA-DATE PARTICIPANTS:

Due to a recent influx of new members, the Sept. 21 notification date has been postponed until on or about Oct. 31, to allow the maximum number of participants.