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Make a difference

Our position: Local lawmakers should wield their clout to save lives.

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Traffic deaths are out of control in Central Florida -- indeed throughout the state.

Already this year, in every county of the region, more people have died in traffic crashes than during the same period last year.

That public-safety crisis affects every resident of this area whenever they leave home. And Central Florida lawmakers cannot afford to sit back and ignore that reality when the annual legislative session starts on Tuesday.

People are dying -- and legislative inertia is partially to blame.

This year, Central Floridians are counting on lawmakers to stanch that needless flow of blood. They can start by advocating a handful of bills that could dramatically reduce the tragic number of crashes and deaths now occurring with alarming frequency on local and state roads.

The areas of most critical concern involve:

- Failure to use seat belts. That's a common denominator in many car crashes that result in death or injury. Under existing law, however, police can't issue a ticket for a seat-belt violation unless a car is stopped for some other violation. Proposed legislation would allow officers to give a ticket anytime they see unbuckled adults in the front seat of a car. Improving seat-belt use by 11 percent could save almost 200 lives in Florida each year.
- Red-light runners. State safety records for 2003 show that there were 8,900 crashes caused by red-light runners in Florida, resulting in 115 deaths, 13,000 injuries and \$77 million in damages. Legislative proposals would raise the minimum fine for red-light running from \$60 to \$125 and authorize the use of automated cameras to catch red-light runners. The increased fines would help deter red-light running and raise money for hospital trauma centers. Changes also are needed to ensure that a red-light runner who kills someone would face criminal charges.

Sadly, most of these proposals are not new. They either died in committee or were shot down by legislative leaders. And the death toll rises with each passing day.

But Central Florida lawmakers can make a difference this year. Republicans call the shots in both chambers of the Legislature. And Central Florida has a strong Republican-dominated delegation. Indeed, the House majority leader this year is Rep. Andy Gardiner from Orlando. Reps. Fred Brummer and John Quinones also are positioned to influence leadership and the regional delegation.

On the Senate side, Republican Sens. Lee Constantine and Daniel Webster, two of the most effective lawmakers in Tallahassee, have the influence to win over Senate President Tom Lee and others.

What lawmaker wants to be seen as soft on crime? Traffic safety is that kind of gut-level issue. Central Florida lawmakers have an obligation -- and the power -- this year to make the streets safer for all.