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BILL TO REGULATE MOPEDS SHOULD HAVE BEEN OK'D

Nikki Haley's libertarian leanings should not have prevented her from signing a moped safety bill.

The Republican governor said the legislation is government overreach, specifically the requirement that reflective vests be worn for nighttime driving and helmets be worn by those under age 21.

In a veto letter to the General Assembly, Haley said the restrictions for mopeds would exceed those for motorcycle drivers, although existing law does require helmets for bikers under age 21. People over 18 "should decide for themselves what they should wear for their personal safety," she wrote.

The Haley veto was among those upheld by lawmakers when an override vote was blocked by a single senator after the House voted 69-33 to override the governor. In sending the bill to Haley two weeks earlier, the Senate approved 41-1.

Supporters of the legislation contend mopeds are among the most dangerous vehicles for people to drive, partly because there are no regulations. Moped drivers are dying because people can't see them, especially at night.

As passed by lawmakers, the bill would require people to register mopeds and attach a license plate. Mopeds would still be exempt from property taxes and insurance. The bill would bar moped drivers from traveling faster than 35 mph. It would require them to drive in the farthest right lane on multilane roadways and make it illegal for mopeds

to be driven on highways where the posted speed limit is 55 mph or greater.

As important as the rider requirements are, an even more crucial aspect of the legislation is closing a loophole that means moped drivers at present cannot be charged with driving under the influence.

Mopeds for the first time would be defined as motor vehicles. For too long, drivers who have lost a license because of DUI have been able to drive mopeds legally because they require no license. And they can be drunk while driving the vehicles.

The bill would create a special moped license. People who lose their regular license, for whatever reason, could get the separate license, starting the point system over. But, importantly, a moped license could be suspended too.

"If that happens, we're starting to lose sympathy for you. You're going to have to be walking," said Sen. Greg Hembree, R-North Myrtle Beach, a bill proponent, regarding lawmakers' desire not to remove mopeds as an option for getting to and from work for those who have lost a regular license.

Fifty people died on mopeds in South Carolina in 2015, more than double the number from just two years before in 2013. Already in 2016, 16 moped drivers and/or passengers have died.

If mopeds increasingly are going to be a reality of the road, there must be sensible regulations. When they return to Columbia in January, lawmakers should move swiftly to reintroduce the moped legislation and work with the governor to determine what it will take to get her signature.