

Buckle Up!

By Reg P. Wydeven
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As a huge fan of the Star Wars and Star Trek franchises, I loved the movie Spaceballs. Written and directed by and starring Mel Brooks, the film is a spoof of the popular sci-fi films, and pretty much the genre as a whole.

The funniest character is Barfolomew, otherwise known as Barf, portrayed by the late John Candy. Barf is a mog – half man, half dog – he's his own best friend. He's also the co-pilot of a space-faring Winnebago. In one scene, he's in such a rush to leave his seat, he forgets to unbuckle his seatbelt. After being thrown back into his chair, he proclaims, "that'll leave a mark."

If the governor and law enforcement have their way, there will be many such marks across the midsection of Wisconsin residents from buckling up.

A proposed law is in front of the state legislature that would change Wisconsin's seatbelt law from secondary to primary enforcement. What this means is that currently, law enforcement officers cannot pull cars over if the driver or passengers are not wearing a seatbelt. They can only ticket people for failing to buckle up after pulling the car over for another traffic violation, such as speeding or a burned out taillight.

If the new primary enforcement law is passed, officers could pull over cars if the driver or passengers are not wearing seatbelts and issue tickets to them. If the law is passed by June 30, Wisconsin would be eligible to receive federal funding of up to \$18 million. The funds would go to the Department of Transportation to be used for highway safety improvements, such as new lights or signs and improvements to pedestrian crossings.

Aside from the funding, the main goal for going to primary enforcement for seatbelts is to save lives. In Wisconsin each year, approximately 350 people not wearing seatbelts are killed in vehicle crashes. Experts estimate that about 25% of Wisconsin drivers do not buckle up, which is lower than the national average. However, according to the Wisconsin DOT, the 26 other states that have implemented primary seatbelt laws have experienced a 10% increase in seatbelt usage. If this statistic holds true in Wisconsin, that could result in saving 50 to 60 lives each year by passing the law.

Wisconsin law enforcement officials support the new law and anticipate an increase in traffic stops in an effort to encourage seatbelt use. While officers do not enjoy writing tickets, they unfortunately see firsthand the carnage of car accidents where victims failed to wear seatbelts. Police officers, firefighters and EMTs would much rather see marks across waistlines from seatbelts than what happens when people go through windshields or are thrown from vehicles.

Opponents of the new measure claim the police have bigger things to worry about than seatbelts, such as drunk driving and non-traffic crimes, such as drug offenses.

All I know is that when I was 8, our family was leaving our hotel in Milwaukee and a station wagon pulling a camper ran a red light and t-boned us on the driver's side. Had I not buckled up, I would have flown across the backseat into my sister, likely killing us both. Needless to say, I was glad for the mark left by my seatbelt.