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Testimony from:
Marc Hyden, Director of State Government Affairs, R Street Institute

In SUPPORT of HB 144, “AN ACT MAKING IT UNLAWFUL TO USE A WIRELESS COMMUNICATION DEVICE 3 WHILE OPERATING A MOTOR VEHICLE ON A PUBLIC STREET, HIGHWAY, OR 4 PUBLIC VEHICULAR AREA.”

March 27, 2019

House Committee on Judiciary

Chairman and members of the committee,

My name is Marc Hyden. I am a former North Carolina resident and the director of state government affairs for the R Street Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, public-policy research organization. Our mission is to engage in policy research and outreach to promote free markets and limited, effective government in many areas, including property and casualty insurance. That is why HB 144 is of special interest to us.

Distracted driving – often as a result of cellphone usage – is a critical problem in North Carolina. In 2016, distracted driving caused more than 20 percent of vehicular accidents in the Tarheel State. In the same year, there were 54,302 crashes, 177 fatalities and 27,011 injuries related to distracted driving in North Carolina alone.¹ Each of these categories have been steadily increasing each year, but these are more than just statistics. They represent loved ones’ lives that are lost, harmed or placed under significant financial pressure due to medical bills and rising automobile premiums.

This issue is not unique to North Carolina. In 2016, nearly 3,500 individuals died in car accidents due to distracted driving, and in 2015, almost 400,000 people were injured in such accidents nationwide.² The scope of the problem has spurred numerous states into action. In fact, 16 states and the District of Columbia now prohibit talking on handheld devices while driving, and the results have been promising.³

Georgia was the most recent state to adopt a hands-free law, and for good reason. Like North Carolina, car accidents, vehicular injuries and fatalities, and automobile insurance claims all were rising in the Peach State.⁴ Georgia’s new law went into effect July 1, 2018. Six months later, experts already credit it with helping to reverse undesirable trends, including roadway fatalities. Indeed, traffic deaths dropped by about 7 percent in 2018.⁵

The benefits of the Hands-Free Act are manifest. If enacted, there is reason to believe North Carolina's results will be similar to Georgia's. This will result in fewer car accidents – thereby saving lives, preventing injuries and reducing overall roadway risk. Another benefit of this proposal is that lowering the rate of automobile crashes will curb the number of insurance claims. Fewer claims should lead to lower premiums – positively impacting all driving North Carolinians.

Considering what other states have experienced after enacting hands-free laws, it seems obvious that North Carolina ought to give HB 144 serious consideration.

Thank you for your time.

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¹ "North Carolina 2016 Crash Facts," North Carolina Department of Transportation, June, 2017.

² "Distracted Driving," National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, October, 2017.

³ "Distracted Driving," Insurance Institute for Highway Safety/Highway Loss Data Institute, July, 2017.

⁴ Wickert, David, "Expert: Georgia cell phone law lowered traffic fatalities," Atlanta Journal Constitution, February 6, 2019.

⁵ Wickert, David, "Georgia's distracted driving enforcement picks up during holidays," Atlanta Journal Constitution, January 3, 2019.