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DIEGNAN BILL PROHIBITING PUBLIC TRANSIT OPERATORS FROM TEXTING WHILE ON DUTY ADVANCES

(TRENTON) – Legislation Assemblyman Patrick J. Diegnan, Jr., sponsored to prohibit operators of mass transit vehicles from texting while behind the wheel was released today from the Assembly Transportation, Public Works and Independent Authorities Committee.

“New Jersey motorists already are prohibited from engaging in distractions such as texting or talking on a hand-held cell phone while driving,” said Diegnan (D-Middlesex). “With the lives of hundreds of people under their care, bus drivers, train engineers and other operators of mass transit cannot afford to indulge in such distractions.”

Diegnan said he became aware of the need for this legislation following a Sept. 12 locomotive collision in Chatsworth, Calif. that killed 25 people and injured 135 more. Federal investigators determined the collision between a California commuter train and a Union Pacific freight locomotive – the worst train accident in more than 15 years – was caused by the commuter train engineer’s inattentiveness due to sending and receiving text messages.

On the day of the crash, the engineer sent or received 57 text messages while on duty; the last one being sent 22 seconds before the crash. Investigators believe this last text caused the engineer to miss a stop signal, causing the head-on collision.

Diegnan’s measure (A-3358) would prohibit the operators of public transportation vehicles from text messaging or sending electronic messages via cell phone or other electronic device while the vehicle is in motion. Violators would face up to \$1,000 in fines and six months imprisonment. Exceptions would be made for electronic messages sent in the event of an emergency or during a radio failure.

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“Our society has become so addicted to electronic communication that we often choose to imperil our lives and the lives of others just to keep communicating,” said Diegnan. “Expanding texting prohibitions to include operators of public transportation will help ensure the tragedy that befell California can never occur in New Jersey.”

The panel unanimously released the measure. It now heads to the Assembly Speaker, who decides if and when to post it for a floor vote.

The measure is also sponsored by Assemblywoman Caroline Casagrande, (R-Monmouth).

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