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Conference teaches road safety to students, adults

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Published: Thursday, September 27, 2012 at 9:44 p.m.

Every year, deputies, police and roadway officials from six south-central Louisiana parishes get together to discuss how to make the roads safer.

This year, that meant discussing issues such as distracted driving, no-refusal DWI policies and bicycle safety at the Houma-Terrebonne Civic Center on Thursday.

"This summit is our opportunity to network, get together with our partners and exchange effective ideas," said Terrebonne Councilman Greg Hood Sr., who also chairs the South Central Safe Community Partnership that hosts the conference.

The partnership is "progressive" and a "very good group," said Sherri LeBas, secretary of the state Department of Transportation and Development. "Just having this summit every year shows their commitment to safety."

Deputies and police from Lafourche, Terrebonne, Assumption, St. Charles, St. James and St. John parishes, as well as people from groups such as South Central Planning and Bayou Region Mothers Against Drunk Driving participated.

A state Highway Safety Commission grant and the DOTD pay for the partnership, said officials with South Central Planning, which runs the partnership.

Students from a handful of schools in the surrounding parishes made field trips to the conference, watching demonstrations that showed them how being drunk affects their driving skills, how seat belts protect them if their car rolls over, and how far 18-wheelers' blind spots and braking distances stretch.

Several 18-wheeler drivers who work for Walmart arrived in Houma to do a presentation about this last issue. Walmart's "Committed to Safety" program sends these drivers to teach adults and students alike.

Truck drivers Albert Jones, Malcolm Taylor and Chris Colomb said they bring people up into the driver's seat and show them how expansive an 18-wheeler's blind-spots are. They show them how many feet between vehicles their trucks need to keep for braking.

It's a dangerous issue that's often glossed-over in driver's education classes, they said.

It's also nice to travel throughout the state, teaching driving safety "versus being in our own other world" on the road, Colomb said.

The "No. 1 priority" of the conference "is to provide safe transport for our traveling public," LeBas said.

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