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Hearing on biker's death draws crowd

Bikers call for tougher penalties in motorcycle deaths

Kris Wernowsky
kwernowsky@pnj.com

The case of a woman who caused a Sept. 11 crash that killed a motorcyclist drew nearly 150 motorcycle rights activists who ringed the M.C. Blanchard Building with their motorcycles Monday morning.

The members of the Gulf Coast chapter of the motorcycle interest club ABATE attended Monday's hearing to draw attention to their long-standing calls for tougher penalties for vehicle drivers involved in crashes in which a motorcyclist is killed. After the hearing began, about 50 motorcyclists went inside the hearing to attend the proceedings.

Tammy Marie Bellamy, 22, of Moss Point, Miss., told investigators she didn't see an oncoming motorcycle before the crash on North Palafox Street south of Burgess Road.

Bellamy pleaded no contest Monday to a failure-to-yield traffic infraction. Escambia County Judge Thomas Johnson fined her \$166.

The penalty angered Gary VerCrouse, president of the local ABATE chapter, who said his organization is lobbying state lawmakers to implement stiffer fines in such cases, as they have done for years.



"Our issue is with the penalties," he said. "We're looking for something more serious when it results in a death."

VerCrouse and more than a dozen fellow bikers staged a similar event at the Blanchard Building in July 2008 when the 18-year-old car driver involved in a fatal crash with a motorcycle faced only a civil fine and no criminal charges in the crash.

State law defines reckless driving — a more serious infraction — as "willful or wanton disregard for the safety of persons." Evidence did not support the more serious charge in this case.

According to a Florida Highway Patrol report, motorcycle driver Anthony Nalbone, 55, and passenger Diana Oglesbee, 45, both of Pensacola, were riding north on Palafox Street about 11:50 p.m. when Bellamy's southbound sport utility vehicle turned left in front of them near Pinestead Road.

The motorcycle crashed into the side of the SUV, and both riders were thrown to the pavement. Nalbone died at the scene. Oglesbee was transported to Sacred Heart Hospital with serious injuries, but was later released. The crash caused permanent injuries.

Neither motorcycle rider was wearing a helmet, investigators said. Alcohol was not a factor in the crash, according to a crash report.