Concerns raised for elderly drivers

By Jaqueline Bostick / The News Herald

PANAMA CITY — The area has witnessed a high number of teenage vehicle crashes and crash-related fatalities over the past year. However, senior citizen drivers also have become a demographic of concern. Recent research by the National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reported how age-related functional defects can influence driver performance and raise the crash risk for older drivers. While crash incidents and fatalities were near average for drivers ages 69 and younger, drivers 70 and above were overrepresented, the study states.

In 2010, a total of 3,115 teenagers died in motor vehicle wrecks compared to 4,139 people ages 70 and older, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reported.

Older drivers are involved in crash-related fatalities simply because of fragility. Local AARP Driver Safety Program Class instructor Bob Gitchell said it comes down to three basic functions that must work properly to ensure safe driving, especially for senior citizens.

"Our vision, our hearing and our flexibility," Gitchell said, "because as we get older, they begin to diminish."

Gitchell said as an instructor he has witnessed good drivers in their 90s as well as terrible drivers in their 50s and 60s.

"It's not really just about age," he added. "When I took the class, I said 'wow' when I realized what I had forgotten and what it reminded me."

Gitchell has instructed the class in Bay County for the past 10 years and welcomes people of all ages to attend.

The next class is Wednesday at the Panama City Senior Center on Lyndell Lane from 9 a.m. to noon. The class fee is $12 for AARP members and $14 for non-members for both classes; for the month of November, class fees for veterans will be waived.

Local fatalities

On Saturday night, 87-year-old Hazel Dill of Youngstown was killed in a car crash. Dill was driving southbound in the northbound travel lane on U.S. 231, which resulted in a head-on collision, Florida Highway Patrol reported.

Kayla Ingerman, the 23-year-old driver of the other vehicle involved in the head-on collision, also died.

In October, 70-year old Kenneth Reid Yates, of Panama City, was killed in a car crash after his vehicle struck two parked vehicles and then the Landmark Construction office at 13220 Back Beach Road.