



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Thursday, January 19, 2006

Contact: Rep. Pam Byrnes
Phone: (517) 373-0828

Friend of Chelsea Librarian Turns Grief Into Legislative Action

Byrnes' bills will punish reckless construction-zone driving

LANSING – On April 8, 2004, Christy Gutekunst was on her way to her job as a librarian at the Chelsea District Library. She stopped with traffic in a construction zone on I-94 near Jackson. A driver smashed into her car, and Christy became one of the more-than 1,000 people killed each year in the nation's highway work zones.

State Representative **Pam Byrnes** (D-Lyndon Township) recently introduced legislation, House Bills 5506 and 5507, that would extend penalties for all accidents occurring in a construction zone, regardless of whether a construction worker is involved. She did so after Gutekunst's best friend, **Sara Jean Nelson**, lobbied State Representatives to pass laws that would crack down on those who drive recklessly in work zones.

"Everyone in a work zone deserves protection under the law from those whose actions victimize them and their families," stated Nelson.

"Last summer, four drivers died in construction-related crashes along a 10-mile stretch of I-94 between Jackson and Ann Arbor," Rep. Byrnes said. "Aggressive driving is an increasingly dangerous reality on Michigan highways, and we need more tools to stop it."

According to court testimony, the driver of the truck that hit Gutekunst had the cruise control set at 68 mph and failed to slow for the approaching work zone. The driver was convicted of negligent homicide and received a six-month jail sentence.

"There are stiff penalties in place for those who injure or kill construction workers in work zones," Byrnes said. "If Christy had been a construction worker, the man who killed her could have received up to 15 years in prison and a \$7,500 fine. My bills broaden the laws to

(more)

apply to anyone driving recklessly who injures or kills another person in a construction zone."

According to the Michigan Department of Transportation, there were 6,323 work zone crashes, 1,751 injuries and 22 fatalities in 2004 – twice as many deaths as the year earlier.

"The Gutekunst family and I seek justice for those who can no longer be heard, a justice that involves punishment for drivers who choose to drive recklessly and negligently in work zones, turning themselves and their vehicles into deadly weapons," said Nelson.

Rep. Byrnes' bills have been referred to the Transportation Committee. To propel this legislation forward, concerned citizens are urged to write to the Committee Chairman, Rep. Phil LaJoy, P.O. Box 30014, Lansing, MI 48909-7514.

#####