



Press Release

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Neenah Arrest is a Reminder About New OWI Law

In the early morning hours of January 5th, Neenah Police arrested a 53-year-old man for 4th offense drunk driving. Those arrests are too common in Wisconsin; what made this one uncommon was that it was a felony.

On January 1, 2017, new law took effect (2015 Act 371) making all 4th OWI offenses felonies. Previous law required that one of the priors fall within 5 years of the most recent arrest. Now, all 4th offense OWI arrests, regardless of dates of priors, are class H felonies.

Under the old law, the Neenah arrest would have been a misdemeanor, with a maximum fine of \$2,000 and up to a year in jail. The new penalties for the same offense are a \$10,000 fine and up to 6 years in prison.

The new law also increased the penalties for 5th and subsequent offenses.

"This is one more example of our social migration toward complete intolerance of drunken driving," said Neenah Police Chief Kevin Wilkinson. "In years past, we laughed about it. Then we started taking it more seriously and we began toughening laws. Today, in addition to the law being much stricter, you are much more likely to feel the contempt of your friends and relatives if you drive impaired. It's simply not accepted anymore."

Local statistics give evidence of the change in societal attitudes. In 2005, the police departments in Neenah and Menasha had a combined 485 drunk driving arrests. That number has slowly dropped over the last decade, even while grant-funded enforcement activities have increased. For 2015, the two departments accounted for only 176 drunken driving arrests. There has been a change in behavior.

"The data show that people are making better decisions - arranging for designated drivers, finding alternate transportation, and limiting their consumption," said Neenah Community Liaison Officer Stu Zuehls. "That's a compliment to our citizens and we want to do all we can to encourage those good decisions. Drunken driving is still a problem, but the trend is moving in a very good direction."