

LaHood criticizes driver distraction lobbying push

July 7 2010, By KEN THOMAS , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood criticized a fledgling lobbying campaign on Wednesday which he said would undermine his work to limit drivers' use of cell phones and other electronic devices while behind the wheel.

LaHood responded to a document prepared by a Washington lobbying firm last month that sought to redirect a national debate on [distracted driving](#). The document argued that the issue had been "hijacked" by celebrities like Oprah Winfrey, leaving the auto and technology industries as "collateral damage" in the discussion.

"I was stunned to read that anybody would organize activities against safe [driving](#)," said LaHood, who has aggressively pushed for restrictions on distracted driving, which is blamed for an estimated 6,000 deaths and a half-million injuries a year.

The document was prepared by the Seward Square Group, a Washington lobbying firm, and said a "benign debate about teens and texting has morphed into a full-throttle assault on [mobile technology](#)." It proposed the creation of a group called the DRIVE coalition to improve public safety, modernize driver education and promote enforcement of laws and driver education "as the solution to distracted driving."

The document outlined plans to recruit numerous technology, automotive and insurance companies to its coalition, including Motorola, Nokia, Verizon, AT&T, T-Mobile, General Motors, Ford, Toyota,

Allstate, Geico, Nationwide and others. LaHood called it an attempt to "rile up the electronics industry and derail our coalition."

Babak Zafarnia, a spokesman for the Seward Square Group, said the proposed coalition was "no longer being pursued" because the group's goal of expanding the debate to include other common forms of driver distraction had been met.

The document said the public face of the group would have been Jim Hall, a former head of the National Transportation Safety Board, who serves as a counsel to the Seward lobbying group.

Hall, at a news conference organized by LaHood, said he had not approved the document and said it contained "inappropriate language." Hall said he would have no involvement in the group because it had mischaracterized his views.

LaHood held a summit on distracted driving last year and has joined with Winfrey to urge people not to use their phones behind the wheel. The Obama administration has prohibited federal employees from texting while driving on government business and banned commercial truck and bus drivers from texting behind the wheel.

Thirty states and the District of Columbia prohibit drivers from texting behind the wheel; eight states have passed laws barring drivers from using hand-held cell phones.

Congress is considering legislation to push all states to ban [texting](#) by drivers and LaHood said he plans to hold another summit later this year.

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