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## Citizens' ideas become law

P.A. LAWMAKER TAKES PROPOSALS TO SACRAMENTO

By **Connie Skipitares**  
*Mercury News*

A substance-abuse counselor from San Carlos who wanted to see teen drinking curbed and a Cupertino father who sought an answer to a quandary over the lawful display of a license plate are the latest citizen heroes in Sacramento.

Their suggestions were turned into two pieces of legislation by Palo Alto-area state Assemblyman Joe Simitian and were signed into law by Gov. Gray Davis on Tuesday. They go into effect Jan. 1, 2004.

The ideas were proposed late last year by counselor Donna Lera and Charles Williams, a tech company CEO, after Simitian announced his second annual "There

Oughta Be a Law" contest. The competition invites ordinary citizens to make suggestions that could generate new laws. Simitian and his staff comb through them, determine which have a chance for success and line up legislative committees to hear them.

"Given the public's disenchantment with government, it's important that people know, through an effort like this, that they can be heard and they can make a difference," said Simitian, who got three "citizen" bills signed into law last year.

On Wednesday, the Democratic assemblyman kicked off his third annual "There

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Oughta Be a Law" contest with an open house in Palo Alto. He hopes to generate about 100 proposals from citizens, roughly the same number received in each of the past two years.

"I did this because I wanted to get ordinary people engaged in the process," Simitian said. "Most ideas for legislation come from organized interest groups, like the Sierra Club or the Board of Realtors, but I wondered if other members of the public had any good ideas. It turned out they did. They the public had any good ideas. It turned out they did. They had lots of them."

Williams, father of an 18-year-old daughter with cerebral palsy, tried for four years to get the Department of Motor Vehicles or another agency to tell him where he could lawfully display a license plate on the back of his car. His daughter's wheelchair covered the plate. State law said the plate should be affixed to its holder or on the wheelchair and it must be visible. It was not practical to affix it to the wheelchair, taken on and off

the car.

The new law, AB 1303, allows the license plate to be covered by a wheelchair, but lets the car owner display a replica of the plate, which can be a sticker affixed to another part of the back of the car. Stickers will be available for free from the DMV to motorists who carry wheelchairs or other medical devices.

"Was it a very small law, absolutely. Is it that important in the grand scheme of things? Probably not," said Williams, who took daughter Molly to Sacramento to testify before legislators earlier this year. "But it touched people and will make many people's lives better."

"It made us feel like government is approachable," he added. "It made us feel like we were part of the process. Having Molly testify put a face on the issue, and that made a difference."

The bill that Lera, the substance-abuse counselor, helped craft — AB 1301 — will impose misdemeanor criminal penalties against parents who knowingly allow minors to

consume alcohol in their home when drinking results in a car accident. Lera felt something had to be done to make parents accountable.

Williams' and Lera's bills are among the 16 that Simitian introduced this year. Seven have been signed into law, one has been vetoed, and eight remain on Davis' desk.

By winning the assemblyman's contest, Williams and Lera will be treated to lunch with the assemblyman and receive a California flag that has flown over the state Capitol.

But the biggest reward the two citizens get, says Simitian, is seeing their ideas become law.

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### **IF YOU'RE INTERESTED**

Anyone in Joe Simitian's district who wants to submit an idea can get details by logging on to the assemblyman's Web site (<http://democrats.assembly.ca.gov/members/a21>), or call (650) 688-6330. Deadline is Oct. 31.

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