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Radar speed signs help drivers slow down

Law enforcement use portable devices to remind motorists how fast they drive

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Montgomery County law enforcement officials have begun using portable radar speed signs in areas with high pedestrian traffic to help drivers maintain legal speeds and protect pedestrians, especially in school zones and neighborhoods.

Transported on portable trailers or permanent fixtures, the machines use a built-in radar to display a car's current speed. Unlike conventional signs that merely display the legal limit for a road, radar speed signs zero in on each car.

"The studies that are coming out now have concluded that the majority of speeders in neighborhoods and school zones are not bad people looking to hit as many kids as they can," said Brad Brenner, an associate at Information Display Co., the primary manufacturer of the signs. "The problem is that people drive at what (speed) they feel is safe, and that's not necessarily what is safe. They're not paying attention to how fast they're going. These signs are the only kind of traffic control devices that redirect their attention."



Montgomery County Sheriff's Department Cpl. Jermaine Jenkins sets up the sheriff's department speed tracker trailer in The Woodlands. The machine is used to measure a vehicle's speed.

DAVID HOPPER: FOR THE CHRONICLE

More distractions

A plethora of new gadgets has contributed to the problem. Drivers now have cell phones, GPS systems, digital radios and DVD players to distract them from the road. Radar speed signs force drivers to refocus their attention on their speed and the road, Brenner said, "getting people to voluntarily slow down."

Lt. Dan Norris of the Montgomery County Sheriff's Department said the interactive signs are a good way to help people keep within the legal speed limit.

"It's a proactive tool to try to shame people into following the law," he said. "I think anything that gets a driver's attention and makes them aware of what they are doing. It makes traffic safer is just another tool in the toolbox."

How it works

Created in the 1990s, the signs were first simplistic displays. An officer would sit in a vehicle with a radar gun pointing at passing cars and the speed would flash on a connected screen. The idea didn't sell well, until Scott Kelley, founder of Information Display Co., put a new spin on the tracking device.

"Somewhere around the early '90s, I came up with the idea of putting it all together into one piece and making it a fully portable unit with the radar built in," he said.

The machines were independently operated, no longer needing an officer on site. Kelley said while having law enforcement in the area does slow traffic, it is not as effective as the radar speed signs.

"They're on the job all the time," he said. "You can put a police officer out somewhere and their presence will slow down traffic, and it keeps those people slowed down for a while, but the speed slowly moves back up. It only affects people aware there are law enforcement in the area. These signs are very effective on the vast majority of drivers and they continue to work. They work particularly well where people are aware of the need to drive cautiously."

A SIGN OF YOUR OWN

For neighborhoods or towns interested in acquiring a radar speed sign, Information Display Technology sponsors a nonprofit Web site that provides general information, various options and gives residents samples of different programs and grant ideas. To start a local campaign to attain a sign or to learn more about them, visit www.stopspeeders.org.

Source: Information Display Technology

CARS VERSUS PEDESTRIANS

As cars speed up, pedestrians become more and more in danger of being injured or killed in an auto accident.

- 36.1 percent of all accidents when a car is traveling 46 miles per hour or greater result in a fatality.
- 39.3 percent of all accidents involving a car traveling 31-35 miles per hour result in an incapacitation injury.
- 35.6 percent of pedestrians receive little or no injuries if hit by a car traveling 1-20 miles per hour, but 1.1 percent are fatal.

Source: World Report on Road Traffic Injury Prevention, 2004

Protecting pedestrians

Kelley said the signs are not meant for high-volume freeway traffic, but rather areas that are most likely to experience accidents involving pedestrians. According to the World Report on Road Traffic Injury Prevention, in 2004 the likelihood of a pedestrian being killed by a car traveling below 20 miles per hour was rare, while more than half of all cars traveling 31-35 miles per hour involved in an accident with a pedestrian were severe or fatal, Kelley said.

Controlling speed has long been the jurisdiction of a stationed officer, but Kelley said research has begun to show conventional signs and methods are not working. Multiple signs can easily confuse and distract drivers, and installing speed bumps may stop cars from barreling through neighborhoods, but it also slows ambulances and emergency personnel.

In a study by the Federal Highway Administration in 2002, officials found that marked crosswalks were no safe haven for pedestrians. Instead, more vehicle accidents involving pedestrians happen there than any other location. Kelley said the research suggests crosswalks "give pedestrians a false feeling of confidence and safety."

Freeing up deputies

For officers, monitoring motorists' speed is a daily job, but one that takes them away from other tasks. Norris said the radar signs allows law enforcement to focus on other issues.

"It kind of monitors the traffic without the officer having to be there so they can do other things," he said.

Kelley said in the last 10 years he estimates his company has sold 8,000 to 10,000 signs to law enforcement units around the country, and he expects those numbers to double in the next four years.

"Radar speed signs have moved from 'new technology' to proven technology," Kelley said. "Studies are proving what experience has shown — radar speed signs are a highly effective, versatile, low-cost solution to slowing traffic."

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