

The Sting

ON INTERSTATE 5 in Snohomish County, Washington, Lance Ramsay stands behind a surveyor's tripod. He is wearing the typical jeans, hard hat and reflective vest of a highway worker. But all is not as it seems. The device on the tripod is actually a laser speed ranging gun, and Ramsay is a Washington State Trooper, tracking cars as they transit from the legal highway speed limit to the "construction zone" limit. A half-mile behind him, eight more troopers wait. The construction zone is a fake, which begs the question of whether the speed limit is even valid. In just two hours, Trooper Ramsay and his crew write 76 speeding tickets—or more than one every two minutes—for an average take of \$210 per ticket. That's approximately \$8000 per hour collected from motorists who actually didn't do anything wrong.

The Washington State Patrol got this idea from Florida, where similar stings have been used. The only difference seems to be that Washington's was an equal-opportunity sting, whereas several reputable sources have reported that the Florida version is heavily skewed toward targeting out-of-state drivers.

As reported by The National Speed Trap Exchange (speedtrap.org), in Denver, Colorado, there was a construction zone set up at the exit from the Denver International Airport. The normal speed limit here is 45 mph, but just around the first curve and difficult to spot is a warning sign dropping the speed to 25 mph, to protect the construction workers. Problem is, no one has ever seen any actual construction going on here, and the only people present are the five or six police officers waiting to nail anyone coming around the curve at over 25 mph. Tickets are an average of \$300 each, doubled because this is a "construction zone."

Lawmakers in Indiana, seeing the potential budget enhancement of special "work zone enforcement," are considering House Bill 1289, to create the "work zone freeway speed program." The bill's sponsor, Bill Friend (R-Macy), wrote on introducing the bill, "Revenues for the new fiscal year are way down." His answer is to lower speed limits on certain sections of freeways to 45 mph, and then allow private contractors to issue citations of up to \$1000 to drivers who miss seeing the speed reduction signs. It is also noted in the bill that no construction need actually be taking place in the "work zone."

In Maryland, a similar program generated 8800 tickets within the first six



weeks, and is on track to generate 76,000 by the end of the year.

In Pennsylvania, the state police are so proud of their construction zone sting that they have given it a cute official name, "Operation Yellow Jacket." That's because they have state troopers dress in the distinctive yellow reflective vests of Pennsylvania DOT employees when they use their radar guns to "sting" unsuspecting drivers.

According to the Trucker's Report, similar operations are underway in Arizona and New Mexico, and Alabama is notorious for having literally dozens of bogus construction zones set up where no worker has so much as turned a spade of dirt in the past several years.

But the all-time winner always has been Pulaski County, Illinois, where a permanent construction zone is used by the local sheriff's office and city police as a primary funding source. For years this area has been the winner of every discussion on the subject of punitive and illegal speed traps ever undertaken in this country. In fact, Pulaski County may have been the first to stumble onto the concept of the fake or permanent construction zone not only as a way to hand out a lot more speeding tickets but to have the fines doubled in the name of public safety.

For years I had a hunch this sort of thing might be going on. How many times have you ridden through a construction zone and seen no sign that any work was being done? Or in an area you pass through often, you find that the construction cones and barrels stay up long after the work was completed? But I never thought it was this widespread or organized until I started doing a little research.

Through the National Motorists Association (NMA), a highly-respected

consumer advocacy group to which I belong, I stumbled upon another revenue-generating scheme, the shortened yellow light scam. I knew from researching this subject about five years ago that there was a virtual epidemic of cities shortening the duration of yellow lights, but at the time there hadn't been any real studies done as to the effects of this practice. Naturally, the municipalities involved either denied the claim or admitted to shortening the lights but claimed that it was in the interest of public safety. Since then, however, a half-dozen independent studies have all shown that shortening the duration of yellow lights drastically increases the rate of intersection accidents, in some cases by as much as 300%. As you might expect, the cities have chosen to completely ignore these results, because the other truth about shortened yellow lights is that the revenue generated from tickets has also increased proportionately. Here are just two examples from Newspaper.com:

Dallas, Texas—An investigation by KDFW-TV found that of the 10 traffic cameras that issued the greatest number of tickets in the city, seven were located at intersections where the yellow duration is shorter than the bare minimum recommended by the Texas Department of Transportation. One camera, for example, issued 9407 tickets worth \$705,525 between January and August.

Union City, California—Union City was caught trapping motorists with a yellow signal time 1.3 seconds below the minimum established by state law. As a result, the city was forced to refund more than \$1 million in fines. The city's violation came to light after Dave Goodson, an engineer, received a ticket and realized that he did not have sufficient time to stop. As a result of his inquiries, Union City's traffic engineers admitted that they had set the yellow signal time at 3 seconds, despite the state law mandating the time be 4.3 seconds or greater.

Those are just two of the more than a dozen instances I found where city governments were purposely fleecing motorists while at the same time knowingly increasing the risk of accidents.

The point I would like to make is that all of these practices and others like them not only will continue but will proliferate until common citizens stand up and fight.

—Fred Rau