

The Camera That Wears a Badge

THESSE days, the police are much less likely to be hiding behind a billboard waiting to nab someone going over the speed limit. Technology has gone far beyond that.

In recent years, local governments have eagerly adopted photo-enforcement technology — surveillance cameras that take a picture of an offending vehicle and its license plate — to nab those who exceed the speed limit or cross an intersection when the light is red.

As with most technological advances, there have been some unanticipated consequences.

Increasingly, travelers are receiving unpleasant surprises in the mail upon returning home: tickets for reported violations that they may not remember, perhaps from weeks or months earlier.

A spokeswoman for Avis said that citations directly attributed to enforcement cameras increased 25 percent in the last year among its customers. Both Avis and Hertz, the two major car-rental companies, say that they often pay the fine and then bill the customer, adding a processing charge.

Casey W. Raskob III, a lawyer in New York who specializes in traffic violations, said that some states and municipalities "want to get enforcement cameras in so badly to raise revenue" that they have reclassified red-light and speeding summonses issued through camera enforcement as violations like parking tickets, and don't assign points to a driver's record as a result.

Although drivers' rights advocates have argued that some states and municipalities have gone too far with photo enforcement, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety is a strong advocate. It argues that standard law enforcement doesn't have the resources to keep pace with violations.

"Between 1995 and 2005, the estimated number of vehicle miles traveled in the United States increased by 23 percent, but the number of municipal law-enforcement officers grew by 12 percent," Stephen L. Oesch, senior vice president at the organization, told Maryland legislators in February.

"Because speeding is common and viewed as acceptable behavior by many drivers, it is a major



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In Charlotte, N.C., a traffic-light camera is positioned to catch any red-light runners in the act. Some drivers have objected.

factor in motor vehicle crashes," the institute said in a recent report evaluating the efficacy of speed cameras. Red-light cameras are now in use in 300 jurisdictions and speed cameras in more than 30 jurisdictions in 26 states, the group says.

Critics point to federal statistics showing that 42,642 people died in motor vehicle crashes in 2006, or 4 percent fewer than in 1975, even though roads have become more crowded. What's needed, the critics say, is better road engineering and law enforcement that concentrates on manifestly unsafe driving.

Drivers, meanwhile, are fighting back with their own technology, as they have since the automobile radar detector became widely popular in the early 1970s.

With tax revenues falling, incentives are growing for municipalities to use photo enforcement to raise cash, said Shannon Atkinson, president of www.Njection.com. With an enforcement camera, he said, "you can pick off 20 people an hour, easily."

Mr. Atkinson, a network engineer, started his business as a Web site for car and driving enthusiasts, but added a popular

feature that merges Google Maps technology with on-site information from motorists that pinpoints real-time speed traps — whether operated by police officers or by camera — at thousands of locations in the United States and abroad.

The feature has drawn many new users, including "drivers whose livelihoods depend on being on the road all the time — your truck drivers, your road warriors who go from city to city," he said.

NJECTION recently began supplying its speed-trap technology to Garmin, the G.P.S. navigational systems company, and is planning to add others like TomTom, Mr. Atkinson said. Drivers can set their devices to map speed traps on any route, he added.

The identities of tipsters reporting the location of a speed trap are protected, he said.

"We actually hear from police officers about where they hang out on such and such days and times — because what they're mostly interested in is getting people to drive safely," he said.