

SEATTLE POLICE DEPARTMENT MEMORANDUM

April 15, 2011

TO: Councilmember Tom Rasmussen, Chair
Transportation Committee

FROM: Assistant Chief Paul McDonagh 
Special Operations Bureau

SUBJECT: Q1 2011 Report on SPD Speed Van Operations

As promised in recent communications with Councilmember Licata, please accept this as our first quarterly report on mobile speed van (photo radar) operations conducted by the SPD Traffic Section during the first three months of the year. Before presenting statistics and comments regarding van operations during the first quarter, it may be helpful to provide a brief background on the van and the results we have achieved with it in reducing speeds in school zones and along selected arterial roadways.

Background. Speed-related traffic crashes remain a major cause of traffic fatalities and serious injuries, both nationally and in Washington State. Responsive to this reality, as authorized in RCW 46.63.170 and Ordinance 122725, SPD developed an automated enforcement program using photo radar to capture speeders in school zones beginning with a pilot project during the 2008-2009 school year.

Subsequently, a budget proviso contained in the State's 2009-2011 Biennial Budget authorized Seattle and Tacoma to test photo radar outside of school zones, and the City Council expressed its intent to proceed with this pilot project in Ordinance 123170 adopted in November 2009. SPD conducted this pilot along 35th Avenue SW and Elliott Avenue West in 2010, working in cooperation with the Washington Traffic Safety Commission, which was charged with evaluating the results of the project and reporting to the Legislature.¹

In developing and evaluating these projects, SPD has worked closely with SDOT, Seattle Municipal Court, and the Law Department in addition to the Washington Traffic Safety Commission. In particular, there has been close coordination with staff in SDOT Signal Operations (school beacon program) and the Traffic Management Section (neighborhood traffic calming measures) in selection of schools and arterial roadways for deployment of the speed van.

¹ For the evaluation report, please see "Automated Speed Enforcement Pilot Project Evaluation: Final Report as Submitted to the Legislature," Washington Traffic Safety Commission, January 18, 2011.

Results. Results achieved during the 2008-2009 schools deployment and during the 2010 arterial pilot project, have shown that photo radar operations can reduce speeding. Results obtained during the 2008-2009 school year showed a significant decrease in speed in Seattle school zones where the van was deployed, typically 5 to 10 MPH – a critical reduction from the perspective of pedestrian and bicycle safety. Results from the arterial speed pilot reported to the Legislature showed significant decreases in average and 85th percentile speeds at the test locations. The significance of results is confirmed by the absence of reduced speeds at “control” sites, where speeds actually increased in some cases.

Q1 2011 Deployment Metrics and Discussion. Statistics descriptive of van deployment during the first quarter of 2011 are presented in the table.

Items Tracked	School Zone	Arterial	Totals
# deployments	24	26	50
# citations issued	164	247	411
posted speed	20 MPH	35 MPH	N/A
mean speed all vehicles	20 MPH	35 MPH	N/A
85 th % speed all vehicles	24 MPH	39 MPH	N/A
violation trigger speed	29 MPH	44.5 MPH	N/A
mean violation speed	33 MPH	47 MPH	N/A
% vehicles in violation	7.6%	2.0%	N/A

These statistics, particularly the mean speed of all vehicles, corroborate the effectiveness of the van in reducing speeds. Results could be even better with increased use of the van. There were approximately five days lost to poor weather conditions during the winter quarter, and the van was off line with equipment problems during a two-week time period in early March. As well, the Department had a single van operator during the quarter and, thus, was unable to cover PM school closings. It did undertake deployment of the van along arterials on weekends, for the first time and with good results, on four separate occasions.

Road Ahead. The Department is committed to deployment of the van to cover school openings and closings, in addition to continuation of arterial road patrols,² 4 to 6 hours daily four days per week. It has identified and trained two additional officers to make this possible. Also, in cooperation with SDOT, we are exploring use of the van at additional arterial locations where speed has been implicated as a significant accident hazard. This increased level of activity should be apparent in our report for the second quarter.

cc: Councilmember Tim Burgess
 Councilmember Jean Godden
 Councilmember Nick Licata

² The Legislature is likely to continue authority to operate on arterials during the upcoming 2011-2013 biennium. Although final action has not been taken on the budget, a proviso has been included to this effect in the WSDOT budget.