

The Payson Roundup

Tickets galore

Star Valley photo tickets running

By Pete Aleshire, Roundup staff reporter

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The surprising number of traffic tickets generated by Star Valley's photo enforcement program on Highway 260 prompted the town council on Tuesday to approve a budget increase to hire someone to help process the tickets.

In March and April, the twin, computer-controlled cameras at each end of town flashed images of 5,816 speeders, producing images sufficiently clear for the town to approve 3,395 tickets, according to the town's contract traffic enforcement agent Richard Baranzini.

The town collects a handling fee of \$45 for each ticket and about one-third of the fine, which averages about \$185 since the system isn't tripped unless drivers are going at least 11 miles an hour over the posted 45 mile per hour speed limit.

However, the town pays the private company that runs the system \$35 per ticket and must pay other personnel and administrative costs.

Before the system went online in March, town officials estimated it would generate about 166 speeding tickets per month, with only 10 percent of the violators slipping through because of bad photos or other problems.

Instead, in its first two months the system produced 1,687 per month with 20 percent of the violators slipping through -- and the heavy summer travel season still ahead.

Baranzini said weekend days generate more than 300 tickets per day. He said a surprising number of tickets have gone to Rim Country drivers and that the volume of tickets hasn't fallen as predicted, since officials thought people would slow down when they got used to having the photo system flashing away.

The Star Valley council acted on Tuesday to keep the town staff from drowning in the sea of tickets.

Town Manager Vito Tedeschi reported that before the town set up the photo enforcement system, the town staff, under an agreement with the court, handled about five tickets per month. Now, they handle 3,000 to 5,000 per month.

Tedeschi asked for approval to hire a full-time clerk at a salary of about \$42,000 and boost the budget by about \$21,000, to handle the volume of tickets.

"This will help our photo enforcement to remain revenue neutral," said Mayor Chuck Heron.

Tedeschi noted that "if trends continue, we anticipate \$800,000 in income," but much of that money will go to pay the company that manages the system and the personnel costs involved in processing the tickets.

He said he didn't yet know for sure how much excess revenue the town's share of the fine and the processing fee will generate.

Baranzini said that Redflex, the company that runs the system, forwards the computerized information and image of the driver and license plate to him if it meets certain criteria.

He then reviews the file to decide whether to issue a ticket. He has been rejecting about 20 percent of the cases referred, mostly because the camera didn't produce a recognizable image of the driver.

He will also reject the ticket if the person at the wheel is of a different sex from the registered owner of the car. He generally rejects tickets for cars that are registered to corporations or for which it looks like it will be hard to prove that the registered owner was the driver.

He said he expects most of the 3,395 people issued citations to eventually pay, since only about 12 people a week schedule court hearings to fight the fine.

The system caused a rash of alarmed drivers earlier this week, when the company tried to work out problems with the clarity of the photos by shooting off a slew of test pictures, mostly flashing images of drivers who were not speeding.

"People were calling saying, 'I was only doing 40.' Once we found out, we could tell people it was only a test."

If you do get flashed, it generally takes just one to two weeks to issue a ticket.

The Star Valley Council this week also voted 3-0 this week to designate the Rim Country Gazette as the "official news agency" of the town.

The action at Tuesday's council meeting came after three councilors removed themselves from the vote because of connections with the paper.

The resolution itself said, "That all public communications, legal notices, publications, press releases, advertisements, community bulletins, classifieds and news reports shall be directed" to the Gazette.

Tedeschi said that "announcements" of town news will continue to go to both papers.