Traffic ticketing increases 42%

BY DOROTHY SCHNEIDER • DSCHNEIDER@JOURNALANDCOURIER.COM • FEBRUARY 25, 2009

Chris Titus certainly doesn't want to be on the receiving end of the increasing number of traffic tickets issued in Tippecanoe County.

But the Battle Ground resident thinks it's good that police issued so many to drivers violating the law in past year.

Overall, local law enforcement data show there were 42 percent more traffic stops resulting in citations in 2008 than there were in 2007.

"In a way I think it's good for the police presence to be there," said Titus, who said he sees regular police patrols along Indiana 43 near where he lives. "Maybe it helps prevent (some) of the crime."

Police in Tippecanoe County hope to cut down on traffic accidents by aggressively monitoring the roads.

They expect the number of citations issued to rise again in 2009 thanks to electronic ticket technology the departments have added, which allows officers to write tickets more quickly and return to service.

Meanwhile, the county clerk's office is taking new steps to ensure the cited drivers are paying up.

County Clerk Linda Phillips said there's roughly $2 million worth of unpaid parking tickets from 2007 and 2006 that her office is turning over to a collections agency.

Only a portion of each ticket payment goes to the county, but Phillips said it's important to try to capitalize on the additional revenue.

The clerk's office does not have the staff or access to resources to track down most of the unpaid ticket holders, but Phillips said the collections agency, Eagle Accounts Group, won't cost the county anything because they will be paid from an additional fee charged to those with outstanding tickets.

Spokesman Sgt. Kim Riley attributed the spike to the increase in the number of troopers in the district. During 2008 the state police post added 16 troopers -- roughly doubling the trooper count -- as part of the governor's initiative to get more police on the road.

"I don't think anybody went out and wrote more tickets," Riley said. "It's just the fact that we had more troopers."

In 2008 the increase in tickets was spread across the board. Many citations were issued for seat belt
violations, speeding and disregard for traffic signals -- but those are usually the highest categories for tickets.

In West Lafayette, police Chief Jason Dombkowski said a large push to get officers patrolling school zones started last year.

"I happen to believe we have had some success there," he said.

Lt. Gary Sparger said West Lafayette and other departments in the county also received federal grant funding to do additional seat belt and sobriety checks.

In fact, two-thirds of the 3,828 tickets issued by West Lafayette police last year were for seat belt violations.

Rachel Schrank, a Lafayette resident, said she hopes police focus on monitoring speeding in neighborhoods, especially ones like hers where people regularly drive too fast on streets where the posted speed limit is 15 mph.

Lafayette's Deputy Chief David Payne said it's part of the department's long-range strategic plan to increase traffic enforcement.

"Data shows that the more active you are, the more you reduce the number of crashes," he said.

County resident Audrey Burghardt is pleased the police are issuing more tickets to drivers disobeying traffic laws.

Safe driving, she said, "is one thing that could be greatly improved in this area."