

Local police can't afford check lanes

By Bob Sklar
staff writer

The only way Farmington Hills could afford to run sobriety check lanes is if the city receives a grant to put officers on overtime.

Check lanes could be effective in helping cut drunk driving, but they're something best left to sheriff's departments or the state police. "I don't know how any suburban department could afford to do it," said Chief William Dwyer of the Farmington Hills Police Department. "I think we're talking about five or six officers per roadblock. We have other traffic priorities."

Dwyer's comments came following a U.S. Supreme Court ruling April 18 focusing on Indiana's check lane program. Without comment, justices let stand lower-court rulings that the results of intoxication tests may be used as evidence.

Even without check lanes, Farmington Hills is arresting more drunk drivers through stricter traffic enforcement. "We're not ignoring drunk drivers. We do have a strong

traffic program. There's a correlation between that and last year's dramatic drop in fatal accidents," Dwyer said.

Three people died in traffic accidents last year in Farmington Hills, the city's lowest fatality rate in 15 years. Last year also was the first year in 10 years the number of accidents reported on public streets dropped — from 2,284 in 1985 to 2,216 in 1986. Drunk driving arrests last year totaled 305, 42 more than the previous year.

Traffic patrols are stepped up in areas where there's a high incidence of injury accidents or drunk driving complaints. "We take a very positive position on selective enforcement in areas where we receive complaints," Dwyer said. "It's not unusual to have our Traffic Division commit officers to certain subdivisions or other areas of the city."

IN FARMINGTON, Department of Public Safety Director Frank Lauboff agrees that the check lane concept is good, but not practical for

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small local departments.

"The question is, 'How can you best remove the drunk driver from the road?' With our manpower and budget, it's more productive to do it with officers in patrol cars individually observing drivers."

Lauboff thinks officers on patrol have more drunk drivers than officers manning check lanes.

"At check lanes," he said, "officers must look for glazed eyes or must smell alcohol on someone's breath and give a preliminary test. Officers on the street have the advantage of observing the way someone is driving."

Conceptually, check lanes heighten awareness of drunk driving. "When people are stopped in a group

situation, they tend to pay more attention to the problem," Lauboff said.

THE AMERICAN Civil Liberties Union said the U.S. Supreme Court's refusal to hear the Indiana appeal will have little impact on Michigan Gov. James Blanchard's fight against drunk drivers.

Howard Simon, Michigan ACLU executive director, pointed out that the high court didn't issue an opinion on the constitutionality of check lanes. Besides, Indiana's sobriety check lanes may differ widely from those instituted by Michigan, he added.

Blanchard, a check lane proponent, said he still hopes to win his appeal of a Wayne County Circuit Court decision in June 1986 that held the road blocks unconstitutional.

"I'm not surprised by the (Supreme Court) ruling," Blanchard told reporters in Detroit. "We had felt all along drunk driving check points were constitutional."

"The question is to what degree do we apply them here, and obviously I'd like to do that. We continue to believe that drunk driving is one of the most serious menaces on the highway."

THE HIGH court's action doesn't mean justices can't one day choose some other case to judge the validity of such police road blocks.

Forty states have used check lanes in some form.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

'Dog bites can be disastrous'

With the arrival of warm weather, Farmington postmaster Kenneth Harris has asked dog owners to help protect their pets and their letter carriers from dog bites.

About 7,000 of the nation's letter carriers suffered dog bit injuries last year, Harris said.

"Dog bites can be disastrous," he said, "and that's why we're asking for cooperation from dog owners. We're hoping they will help to protect both their pet and their letter carriers."

Harris suggested that dog owners keep their pets away from the mailbox and the areas used by the mail carrier for access to the property.

"If the pet is not kept behind a secure fence, then we suggest the owner restrain the dog with a leash or keep it inside during the usual hours of the carrier's delivery," he said.

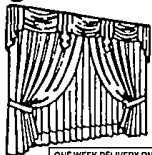
The Postal Service has the right to protect its carriers by refusing to deliver mail to a household with an unrestrained dog. In cases where a dog is allowed to run loose in the neighborhood — and it interferes with a carrier — delivery service to the entire area could be affected.

The Postal Service also provides counseling to bitten carriers wishing to seek action against the dog owners.

"We constantly alert our carriers to the danger of unrestrained dogs," Harris said. "But the real solution is for dog owners to cooperate."

"Owners need to realize that dog ownership carries with it several responsibilities," he added. "Preventing their dogs from biting or attacking people who must enter the property is one of them. We don't think that's too much to ask."

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