

DRIVING IT HOME

Accident decline

Stepped-up police work makes the difference

STORIES BY RICHARD PEARL

Traffic accidents declined in 1998 compared to 1997 in eight of the 10 communities in Wayne and Oakland counties served by the Observer Newspapers and local police mainly credited concentrated patrols for the improvement.

Re-engineering of intersections also got some credit, as did milder weather in 1998.

The figures, released by the Michigan State Police, also showed seven of the 10 communities had fewer personal injury accidents in 1998 than in '97.

The patrol figures come from statewide community police department reports.

The 1998 figures are the latest available from the MSP. The 1999 totals are expected in the spring, the department said.

Showing a reduction in total traffic accidents, according to the state police, were (in alphabetical order) Canton Township, Farmington Hills, Garden City, Livonia, Plymouth Township, Redford Township, City of Wayne and Westland.

Communities with fewer personal-injury accidents were (also

in alphabetical order) Canton, Farmington, Farmington Hills, Garden City, Livonia, Plymouth Township and Westland.

In raw numbers, Livonia, the most populous city in the group, also had the most accidents, with 4,280 in 1998, a drop of 6 percent from '97.

Rounding out the top five were Farmington Hills with 3,056; Westland 2,072; Canton 1,360 and Redford Township 1,882.

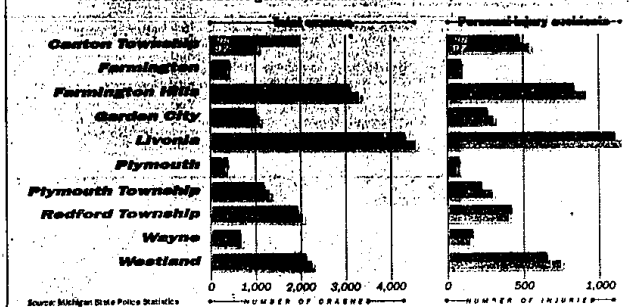
Livonia leads

Livonia also had the most personal-injury accidents in '98 with 1,101, followed by the Hills with 833; Westland 641; Canton 469 and Redford 407.

Garden City, however, led in percentage decline of total crashes with 12 percent - from 1,103 crashes in 1997 to 970 in '98.

In terms of personal injury accidents, Plymouth Township led with a decline of 26 percent - from 300 to 212. Garden City was second with an 18 percent decrease, from 308 in '97 to 254 in '98. Westland was third with a 14 percent decline (747 in '97 to 641 in

Traffic accidents from the 10 Observer-area communities
Crashes and accidents generally declined in 1998 compared to 1997



1998).
Garden City Police Lt. Mel Maier said the decline in crashes there was due both to "stepped up active patrols in high-accident areas" and working with Wayne County and the state "to improve the engineering of intersections" - in particular the installation of left-turn signals at Middlebelt and Warren Roads and Middlebelt and Ford.

Maier said the signals "cut down dramatically" on left-turn accidents, especially at Ford and Middlebelt where fewer people can red lights or turned left into oncoming traffic.

Maier said Police Chief Dave

Harvey also put Officer Loren Zetti into afternoon traffic patrol, both to respond to traffic accidents and learn what area residents and business owners see as traffic problems.

The two top accident intersections in Farmington Hills in 1998 - 12 Mile and Orchard Lake Roads (95 crashes) and Orchard and 14 Mile (92 accidents) - have begun benefiting from traffic-signal timing changes and should continue improving, according to Hills Traffic Bureau Lt. Gary Hawald.

He said the reconstruction of the Grand River and Halsted interchange with M-5, which "always used to be in the top five" in terms of wrecks, also seems headed for fewer crashes.

Other police departments said stepped-up traffic enforcement efforts, most funded by grants from the state and federal governments and by overtime allotments, cut crashes.

Red runners

Canton Lt. Pat Nemeczek said his Selective Enforcement Unit (SEU), working with regular patrol officers, targets intersections where drivers run red lights - most of them along Ford Road, which is the township's main east-west thoroughfare and its most congested street.

But the SEU officers also analyze the intersections to determine the type of accidents and why they're happening, he said.

Such information helps the township get improvements at intersections, he said, one of which may be a left-turn signal at busy Ford and Canton Center.

Chief Lawrence Carey in neighboring Plymouth Township said the township board in '98 approved additional funding for selective enforcement where most accidents occur - along Ann Arbor Road.

Carey said as a result, traffic stops increased from 6,820 in 1997 to 9,011 in '98, with total tickets issued jumping from 3,728 to 8,840.

That helped township police win a traffic award for enforcement from the Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police in '98. The township effort is continuing, Carey added. Some 9,811 violations were issued in 1999.

A left-turn arrow at Lilley and the repaving of Ann Arbor Road this summer also will help the situation, he said.

Livonia Sgt. Wes McKee, Redford Officer Scott Corso, Wayne Officer Ken Kapanowski and Westland Sgt. Peter Brokas also attributed the decline in crashes to aggressive enforcement.

Seatbelt law takes effect March 10

Here's a "heads-up" for all Wayne and Oakland County drivers: Start getting used to wearing your seatbelt now - because stepped-up enforcement begins next week.

Although the new statewide seatbelt law doesn't take effect until March 10, police and sheriff's deputies in the two counties will conduct a "get-used-to" period running Feb. 8-19, according to Sgt. Pete Brokas of the Westland Police Department.

During that time, officers and deputies will enforce both speeding and seatbelt violations now in effect. "We'll be working with 20 other communities" in Wayne County, including the cities of Livonia and Detroit, Brokas said.

On March 10, not wearing a seatbelt will become a primary traffic violation, so next week's efforts will be aimed at educating the public toward that, he said.

When the seatbelt law becomes primary, it will mean officers can stop people for that violation alone, Brokas said. "You don't have to be spending for us to stop you."

At present, seatbelt violations are ticketed only when discovered during a traffic stop for other violations such as speeding, registration or other violations.

During the "get-used-to" period, officers will target rush hours, mornings in particular, because police are seeing "more and more" serious accidents then, Brokas said.

Wayne County Sheriff Robert Ficeno said his deputies also will emphasize the education aspect.

Please see LAW, A8

Courtesy could lead to trouble

Think you're being courteous when you stop in traffic to wave someone out of a parking lot?

You're not. In fact, you're probably setting that someone up for an accident.

So says Gary Goss, director of public safety for Farmington.

"That's a trap," says Goss, because you could be blocking the other driver's vision.

The so-called "good deed" came up in an interview with Goss about traffic accidents and their causes.

To Goss, the practice of stopping to let someone into traffic was among many of the pet peeves he's acquired in his 30 years in the police business.

For instance, there was the time on Telegraph Road that he saw a nicely dressed woman driving a Cadillac STS stop at a light, open the door - and spit. When he pulled alongside, he saw she was brushing her teeth as she drove.

"One of the principal problems we have," he says, "is that we have built our cars so well and so comfortable that people are not aware of how fast they are going and what's going on around them."

To that, Goss adds all the conveniences that isolate drivers even more, such as stereos with concert sound and complicated controls and carphones that let you read the stock report. "It's become very

easy for someone to be distracted," he says.

"People have just picked up these habits," he says, and the lack of attention in "an area we need to concentrate on."

"Yes, cars are getting safer," Goss acknowledges. "But we still have a long, long way to go."

Goss likes to quote a friend who's a bank loan officer, but who sounds more like a cop.

"He always says, 'When you are seated behind the steering wheel of a car, you have one and only one job to do, and that's driving the car. Everything else is immaterial,'" Goss quotes.

Please see COURTESY, A8

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