

Speed boards target distracted drivers

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By PHIL PITCHFORD / The Press-Enterprise

Cash-strapped cities with speeding problems are turning to a new variation on an old favorite -- the speed board, a digital watchdog that uses radar and guilt to encourage lead-footed motorists to slow down.

Portable versions of the devices have been used for years by police departments. Hitched to small trailers, they typically are rolled into school zones and areas where chronic speeding has generated complaints from residents and business owners.

Now cities are turning to permanent devices that run by solar energy and provide what is designed to be an ongoing deterrent to dangerous driving. Riverside is trying one of the devices on a stretch of road that is heavily used by commuters. Fontana, Rialto and Canyon Lake have ordered or installed such devices, according to a regional vendor.

Speed boards use radar to gauge the speed of oncoming vehicles, much like a traffic enforcement officer would do, then display those speeds as motorists pass by. The premise is that drivers who are talking on cell phones or not paying attention will see how far over the speed limit they are driving, and slow down.

"It's just a way to get their attention because a lot of times people do not realize how fast they are going," said Patti Castillo, a senior engineer in Riverside's traffic engineering division. The city has posted one of the devices on Arlington Avenue, west of Alessandro Boulevard, for about a month.

"There are continual speed problems in that area," Castillo said.

Riverside's experiment with the device likely will last several months, Castillo said. If it helps with the problem, the city will buy it and perhaps others, she said.

Another possibility is Van Buren Boulevard, which Castillo said has a speeding problem "anywhere from the freeway to the county line."

The devices are set to record speeds, but only to a certain degree.

They are programmed with a set limit so that motorists cannot hit the gas just to see how high they can make the numbers rise, said Al Valdez, whose company, J&J Inc. in Chino, supplies Inland cities.

Valdez acknowledges the speed boards cannot do anything about people who disregard the speed limit.

Those cases are best handled by police officers in each city's traffic division, he said.

"You're always going to get a certain percentage that will barrel down the road, regardless," Valdez said. "But most of John Q. Public will react in a positive fashion, i.e. slowing down to whatever the speed limit is posted."

The Speed-Check model sells for about \$4,600, Valdez said, compared to as much as \$125,000 for a traffic light or more for the salary and benefits of a new police officer.

The devices do not snap photographs like some that are used to catch people who run red lights at intersections.

They can, however, be modified to keep a running count of how many cars come through an area and how fast they are going.

That data can help cities determine whether the devices succeed to persuading motorists to slow down.

It also can show when speeding is most likely to be a problem so that cities can follow up with motor officers with ticket books.

The devices are most effective with distracted drivers who need a little reminder.

"When people see they are exceeding the speed limit, they usually start applying their brakes," Valdez said.

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Paul Alvarez / The Press-Enterprise

Motorists drive past a new solar-powered speed board on the southbound lanes of Arlington Avenue at Royale Place in Riverside. The signs cost about \$4,600 each and are cheaper than traffic signals, said a vendor that supplies the devices to Inland cities.