



WILMINGTON | Traffic police more visible



Wilmington Police Department Officer J.E. Moore uses radar to catch speeders along Long Leaf Hills Drive in Wilmington on July 26. Photos by Mike Spencer

Spotting speeders

Increased enforcement credited with reducing citations in city

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If you've got a lead foot, you might want to ease up on Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway and Rogersville Road, or steer clear of them entirely.

In 2012, the Wilmington Police Department issued more speeding tickets on those roads than anywhere else.

Wilmington police handed out 282 tickets in the area of 2300 Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway, the most common location for them to pull drivers over for speeding, followed closely by the 200 block of Rogersville Road, where 261 stops were made.

An additional 70 stops were made in the 300 block of Rogersville Road, and humping the two together would give the street more than 330 stops, easily the most for any single location.

Plenty of other drivers saw WPD officers during 2012, but the total number of speeding tickets issued is declining. According to data obtained by the StarNews, WPD issued 4,071 tickets last year, marking the fifth consecutive year the department's speeding citations have decreased.

Among the reasons a WPD spokeswoman gave for the drop in citations are the success of a program focused on decreasing violent crimes by



Officer Moore monitors radar in his Chevrolet Camaro patrol car.

strictly enforcing speeding laws, the prioritization of more violent crimes with task forces that pull some officers off patrol and the department's ongoing manpower shortage.

Wilmington police have implemented a program called Data-Driven Approaches to Crime and Traffic Safety that makes law enforcement highly visible in select areas to cut down on the

BY THE NUMBERS

Wilmington Police Department speeding citations

2012: 4,071
2011: 4,843
2010: 6,008
2009: 6,117
2008: 6,247

Types of violations for 2012

Aggressive driving: 14
Exceeding safe speed: 352
Impeding traffic: 6
Speed competition: 7
Speeding in highway work zone: 3
Speed violation > 15 mph: 121
Speeding: 3,243
Speeding in a school zone: 202

Source: Wilmington Police Department

INSIDE

See a map of the city's top 10 spots for speed-related citations, 6A

EXPLORE

Online | Search a database on speeding tickets at StarNewsOnline.com/Speeding.



SPEED

Continued from 1A

number of crimes involving motor vehicles. The program is supported by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Bureau of Justice Assistance and the National Institute of Justice.

"We believe by hitting those areas where there was a lot of speeding, we were also able to deter crimes around those areas," said Linda Rawley, a WPD spokeswoman.

Trying to cut down on speeding isn't the only way WPD has tried to address violent crime, with programs such as the department's Mobile Field Force and Operation Tranquility pushing some officers off normal patrol.

"When we started focusing on some of these task forces, that kind of pulled some of those officers away from traffic enforcement," Rawley said.

Even though fewer officers might be focused on traffic enforcement, the officers who are assigned to the area's roads and District Attorney Ben David's office are working together to crack down on speeding throughout the county, and they believe targeted enforcement is making a dent.

"We cut down on the amount of speeding in (targeted) areas," Rawley said, "and we started driving the number of speeding citations down."

The speeder

It's a steamy afternoon in July, and Officer J.E. Moore knows it's the kind of day where Wilmington drivers can't help but push the limit.

"It gets busy whenever that sun comes out," he said.

Moore, a 16-year veteran of the Wilmington Police Department who has been in the traffic division since 2008, is sitting in his unmarked Camaro in a driveway on Oleander Drive at about 2 p.m.

It takes only about 10 seconds to prove Moore's hunch right, as a white Honda Civic flashes past, tailgating a red truck, and the radar unit on the dashboard flashes 58 mph in the 45 mph zone.

After quickly checking to make sure that pulling into the busy road won't endanger anyone, Moore floors his gas and approaches the car, which doesn't seem to notice Moore until his sirens let out an unmistakable *whoop whoop*.

The older woman driving the Civic claims she was surprised to see Moore's flashing blue lights behind her because she was unaware of how fast she was going.

"Drivers don't pay attention. I think they don't look for the signs," Moore said.

The best outcome for being pulled over for speeding will be a warning, the worst a hefty fine and jacked-up insurance rates. And a speeder who isn't stopped and is overly reckless can cause a serious accident.

So if those are the risks, why do so many push the gas pedal a little more than they're supposed to?

Moore hears a variety of reasons from the people he stops.

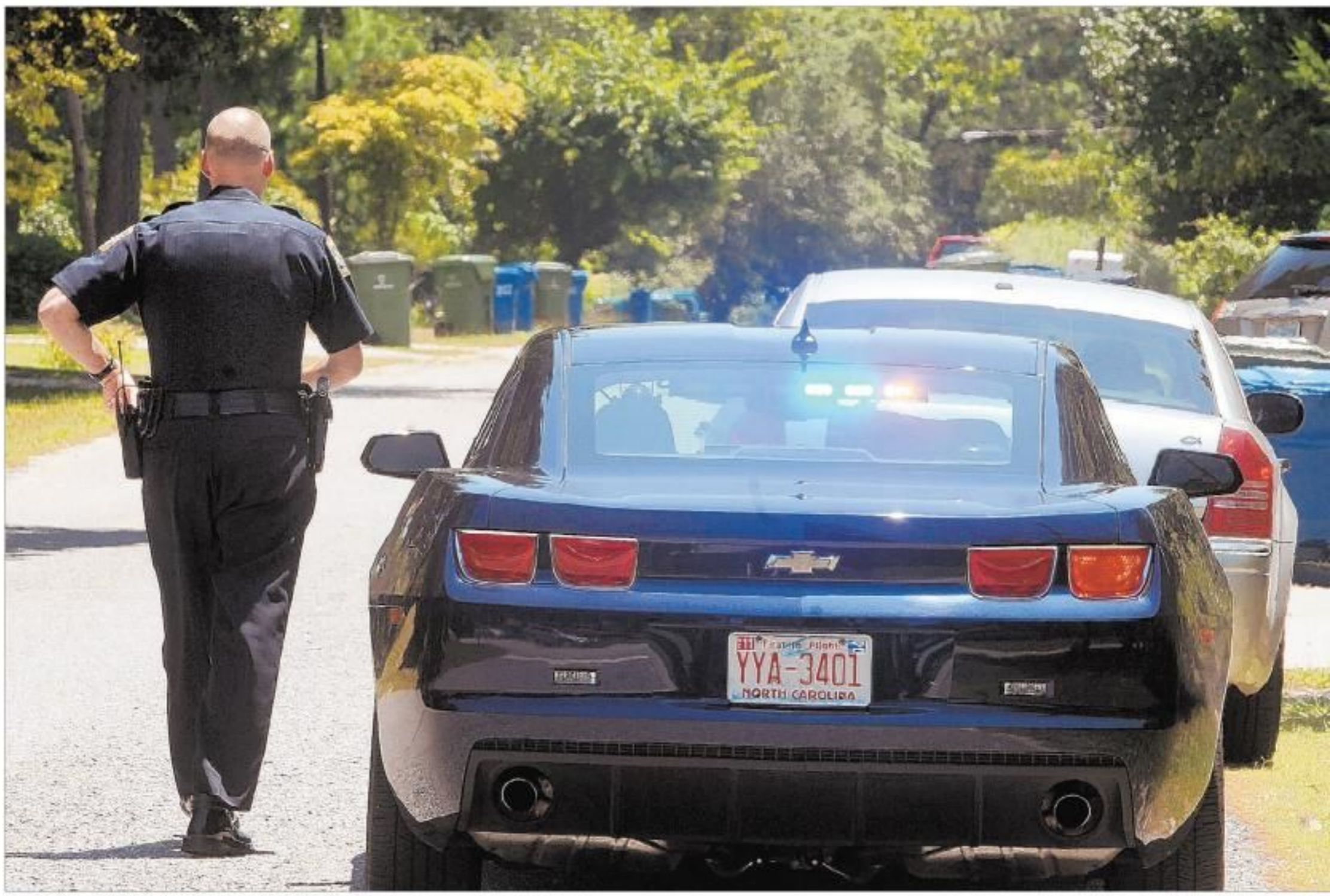
"Most of the time, they'll say, 'I'm late for work.' Some people just have no reason at all," Moore said. "Some people, you'll just look at their history and they just don't care."

Jennifer Andrews has accumulated at least 20 tickets since she started driving in 1999, but paying more than \$4,000 in fines and court fees isn't enough to keep her from driving over the speed limit.

"I've had so many tickets and I still speed. I just pay the fines and accumulate points, but it doesn't stop me," Andrews said. "... I'm always in a hurry to go nowhere."

In an effort to keep her from stepping on the gas pedal too hard, Andrews' husband bought her a car with cruise control.

Even that wasn't enough, though, as Andrews' latest



Wilmington Police Department Officer J.E. Moore uses radar to catch speeders along Long Leaf Hills Drive on July 26. 'It gets busy whenever that sun comes out,' said Moore, a 16-year veteran of the police department. Photo by Mike Spencer

SPEED SPOTS

These are the 10 spots where the Wilmington Police Department says it issued the most speed-related citations in 2012 and how many it issued at each site.



- 1 200 block of MLK Jr. Parkway (282)
- 2 200 block of Rogersville Road (261)
- 3 200 block of Wood Dale Drive (145)
- 4 200 block of Greenville Avenue (99)
- 5 Isabel Holmes Bridge (97)
- 6 200 block of Hooker Road (97)
- 7 1900 block of Burnett Boulevard (82)
- 8 1200 block of Eastwood Road (74)
- 9 300 block of Rogersville Road (70)
- 10 2100 block of Market Street (69)

More online: Go to StarNewsOnline.com/Speeding to search a database of 2012 Wilmington and New Hanover County speeding tickets.

SOURCE: Wilmington Police Department

ticket came from the N.C. Highway Patrol in June when she was nabbed driving 82 mph in a 70 mph zone on N.C. 40.

"I don't know why I speed - I just drive. I can't stand being behind people, and I think that's my biggest problem," Andrews said. "I don't like being in traffic, I don't like being behind people. I get in front of people and then I don't slow down."

Lance Bowser, who is concerned about his Sixth Street neighborhood, thinks habitual speeding is tied to the adrenaline rush that comes with the engine at full throttle.

"I just think drivers don't think that anybody else exists and they just like to drive fast. It's more fun," he said.

The stop

Just because someone's driving a tad over the speed limit doesn't necessarily mean he'll get stopped.

"Not everyone's going 45 (on Oleander), but we don't look at people going 5 over the speed limit," Moore said. "Are they violating the law? Yes. And the law says I could stop them and give them a citation because they are traveling over the speed limit, but I would rather wait for somebody who's being a little more significant or causing a hazard."

Once an officer does pull someone over, he might give the driver a warning instead of a citation after reviewing the driver's history and considering the extent of the violation.

If a ticket is the result, though, it's probably a good idea to avoid talking back to the officer, particularly if you plan on challenging it in court.

"If they're nice or if they're real nasty to me, I'll put that in there for the judge to see," Moore said.

Moore proved this later in the day when a black Honda Civic coming home from Juncie Roping blew past his spot at 60 mph, immediately tailgating another car.

Moore pursued and, when he made the stop, the driver was adamant that she had been driving 48 mph when the radar showed her going 10 mph faster than that and the officer's car struggled to catch up with her even though he was flooring the gas.

"She was just kind of dumbfounded that she was getting stopped," Moore said. "She said 48. I said no, there was no way."

Moore then simply wrote the woman a ticket and let her know her options.

The radar

To pull someone over and successfully cite him, an officer needs two corresponding pieces of evidence.

One is the radar, which has the word "STALKER" etched in white letters on the side of its black case.

The other is the officer's own eyes and judgment.

"I have to be able to say that guy is the one speeding. That guy's going faster than everybody," Moore said. "Then ... I use my radar to corroborate that."

The officer's opinion is crucial because speed given by the radar detector does not necessarily mean that's the speed the driver is going: The machines are capable of giving off faulty readings.

"There's times you take a clock and the radar may say a number, but you're looking at a car and you're not seeing

Art by Stacie Greene Hidek

"Drivers don't pay attention. I think they don't look at the signs."

J.E. MOORE, WILMINGTON POLICE OFFICER

it. So you're trained not to do an enforcement with that clock," Moore said, shortly after the radar said a car was going 71 mph even though it was clearly much closer to the limit.

Moore added that if too many people complain about an officer, he loses credibility.

To be qualified to use a radar detector, officers have to complete 32 hours of training and classroom work, pass a written test and pass a motor skills test with the radar.

In the final part of the test, officers have to time three cars apiece coming toward them and going away from them while they are sitting still, as well as three cars going away from them and moving toward them while the officer is moving. Once the test is complete, the officers can have been off on their estimates by a total of about 32 mph.

"They don't cut you any slack on it because it's a good tool. Once you go through that program, you have to be able to estimate the speed of cars," Moore said.

Officers who are not certified to use radar do not have the units in their cars.

The legal process

Every speeder can plead

REPORT A PROBLEM

Wilmington residents who are concerned about speeding on their streets or in their neighborhoods can call the Wilmington Police Department's front desk at 343-3600.

guilty and pay a fine, but he'll also see an increase in car insurance and receive points on his license.

The other option is to attend traffic court, with the date set at least 30 days from the citation.

In New Hanover County, the District Attorney's Office has traffic court at 8 a.m. each Friday. On those days, district attorneys, not judges, handle roughly 1,000 cases of speeding tickets, expired tags and other violations. "We only handle traffic tickets, so we deal with soccer moms and bankers on those days so we don't have to clutter up the judge's time, we don't have to have the officer there," said Samantha Dooies, District Attorney Ben David's administrative assistant.

Speeders who attend traffic court often have their violations dropped to nonmoving, improper equipment violations once the drivers swear that they are not a repeat offender.

Sometimes, the driver has to complete driving school before the citation is reduced from speeding to improper equipment.

Every driver younger than 25 who receives a citation is sent to driving school.

The District Attorney's Office cannot give legal advice because personal histories and insurance plans vary, but it is usually useful to get the charge reduced to improper equipment.

"Typically this is a good option because a moving violation versus a nonmoving violation is something that's generally positive, but that's not the case in every instance," Dooies said.

Drivers also have the option of avoiding a ticket entirely with a prayer for justice continued (PJC), but that has some catches.

By using a PJC, a driver avoids seeing his insurance rates rise or getting points on his license. He does still have to pay a fine and court costs and attend traffic court.

Each household can use only one PJC in a three-year period, and it's not an option if your wife or dad has already used it.

Furthermore, if a driver uses a PJC and receives a similar ticket within the three-year period, he'll get the court costs from the second offense, both fines, insurance from both tickets and likely the points from both tickets.

Not every offender can use a PJC. If the violation is more serious or reoccurring, the officer can choose to give the individual his own court date, in which he will testify to the crime's severity.

"That's an indication to us that something funny's hap-

pened here, that they have a really bad record or they mouthed off to the officer," Dooies said, adding that a reduction in punishment is unlikely.

The hot spots

So how do officers decide where to patrol?

Some spots, such as Oleander Drive and Market Street, are obvious, while others are based on officers' experience and residents' complaints. Moore, who also takes reports from serious and fatal wrecks as part of his job on the traffic unit, will patrol in locations where speed contributed to injuries or fatalities.

"I go where there's a problem. I work the whole city," he said. "... If I've taken a fatality or I've done bad wrecks in certain areas and I know where there's a lot of bad speeding, I can go work that, too."

In other locations, such as Waltmore Road and Long Leaf Hills Drive, police receive regular complaints from residents about speed. When the department receives such a complaint, officers check to see if there is a problem and how severe it is before patrolling the area regularly.

"I will (go after drivers closer to the speed limit) if there's a speed complaint," Moore said. "That's when we have a little less tolerance because people are out here speeding (and) people are complaining about it."

Bowser, who has lived in the 500 block of South Sixth Street for about a decade, would like to see police step up their presence in his neighborhood. Cars routinely use Sixth Street as a cut-through from Market Street to Dawson or Wooster streets.

"A street like this is fairly narrow with cars on both sides, especially from Church to Castle. It doesn't seem like it slows anybody down," Bowser said.

Bowser added that he's complained to police and briefly saw an officer in the area, but the presence was not maintained.

When officers are patrolling busier roads, they also have to consider their ability to safely enter flow of traffic to chase a speeder.

On Oleander, for instance, Moore figures speeders tend to outpace everyone else, giving him a chance to catch up.

"You have a little gap where you can turn out," he said. "And when you do it, you can't hesitate. You just gotta go."

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