

## **Learn the Facts Why Smith County Supports Its School Zone Speed Safety Camera Program**

Smith County's proposal to initiate a school zone speed safety camera program is stirring up a lot of questions, which is understandable. Unfortunately, misinformation is turning a reasonable idea into a big misunderstanding. This can't continue. We all want what is best for our children and our families, and I believe this program will provide a necessary safety measure for us. To understand why I believe this, it's important to begin with good information and outreach.

American Traffic Solutions ("ATS") approached Smith County with the proposal for the school zone program, and I sponsored the commissioners court action that led to the contract for school zone cameras. I championed this cause having researched speeding in school zones, camera enforcement programs in other communities, and discussions with another Texas county judge who was implementing the program.

The commissioners and I took months to consider this program, researching other cities and counties which have participated in similar programs, talking with elected officials in some of those communities, visiting with and seeking input from constituents and both elected and appointed officials within Smith County, asking thorough questions of the American Traffic Solutions ("ATS") representatives, and considering the provisions of the contract ATS had proposed. We vetted the program legally through discussions with our own legal counsel, in addition to former Texas Supreme Court Chief Justice Tom Phillips. With hard work, diligence, and good intentions, your county commissioners and I voted 4-0 to approve the program on August 12th, a unanimous consensus of all commissioners attending.

The terms of Smith County's agreement with ATS were negotiated by all parties. As authorized by the commissioners court, the contract was finalized in January after a meeting which included the county's auditor, tax assessor/collector, purchasing director, fire marshal, the county's legal counsel and myself, along with representatives from ATS. There are no upfront costs to the county to launch the program. All charges are billed against the revenue generated by speeding drivers. Smith County will not incur any out of pocket costs.

As county judge I should have done a better job of public outreach and education regarding this program. As the presiding officer of the commissioners court, I take full responsibility for not leading a more robust a public discussion on this topic prior to entering into the program. I am sorry for this error in the process.

Therefore, I have asked the School Safety program vendor, ATS, to pause and delay the start of the program to allow us to do a better job with communication and outreach. ATS has also agreed to survey school zones around the county and to provide data regarding speeding in those locations. It's now important that we restart the public conversation with facts.

Smith County wants to use portable speed cameras to curb speeding in school zones. This program will allow us to transport cameras among the school zones where they are needed and to keep doing so until the problem is corrected. At this time, there is no decision as to which schools will receive a camera or on what frequency. Smith County will work with the county's school districts to create a deployment strategy that ensures

that the cameras are deployed in districts where school zone speeding has been identified as a problem. In addition to a 30 day warning period, the county will also provide public awareness materials to county schools and communities throughout the county reminding them of the program's launch and subsequent enforcement.

This public awareness effort will be put forth to alert and inform the public about the program before it starts. Camera placement will vary, but the containment boxes will be easily visible and well-marked alongside the road, and signs will be used to alert drivers of a photo enforcement zone ahead. The cameras will be used to photograph the back end of vehicles far exceeding the posted speed limit in the school zone on a public road. No ticket is issued without local law enforcement's review and certification, and anyone who receives a ticket can appeal it.

I want to emphasize that before this program begins, all stakeholders will have input this program. The purpose of this safety program is not a money making venture as some have alleged. Rather it is a public safety initiative that is certain to produce optimum results with the highest level of cooperation. My hope then is for all stakeholders in the county, cities and their schools join this important discussion.

Speeding in school zones is a concern in Smith County that needs to be addressed. One only need park for a few minutes in virtually any school zone in our community and personally observe the speeders. In 2012, KYTX-TV reported that authorities issued 433 speeding tickets in Tyler school zones between August 27 and September 18 of that year, for an average of about 25 tickets a day. At that rate, police could issue 4,500 speeding tickets over a 180-day school year. A speed study in 2013 by American Traffic Solutions indicates drivers hadn't changed. Their study identified 3,000 speeding violations in Tyler school zones. Even more upsetting, though, is the study's finding that the number of vehicles traveling 15 mph over the speed limit increased 100 percent from 2012 to 2013 and vehicles moving 20 mph over the speed limit in school zones increased more than 85 percent over the same time period. This is dangerous and unlawful.

Although this data pertains to school zones in the city of Tyler, where there are 27 schools, there are nearly 60 schools throughout Smith County, and I believe students at schools outside Tyler face a similar threat by drivers who are regularly ignoring the traffic laws in school zones. Speeding drivers endanger children who can pop out between cars, race across the street or change directions without looking. On average, more than 100 children are killed every year while walking to and from school in our nation and about 25,000 are injured. Speeding drivers heighten the danger children face in school zones. In a car-pedestrian collision, a child's chances of survival diminish as the speed of the car increases.

Police and sheriff's deputies can be deployed to curb this behavior, but ever-increasing demands on their time and resources limit the availability they have to enforce vehicle speeds. Camera enforcement is a viable alternative that operates on funds collected from speeding drivers. Research from the Texas Transportation Institute proves that drivers behave differently when they are held accountable for their actions. A very visible, well-marked enforcement vehicle such as the ones utilized in this program will reduce speeding in school zones.

These many facts persuaded me to push forward with a school zone speed safety camera program in Smith County. Too often in government and in life we take a reactionary approach to issues. Here is one way that we can proactively offer a solution for the protection of children and others in school zones before a death or a serious injury occurs. This work falls within the duty and responsibility of government to consider all practical safety measures to counter a measurable danger and then take action. To do anything less puts our children at risk.

5-2-15

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joel Baker". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.