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John Baer | Another black eye for State Police

by JOHN M. BAER

IMAGINE, if you will, the following scenes along our highways, along our turnpike.

A Pennsylvania State Police cruiser, lights flashing, screeches to a stop.

"OK, roadside rock, roll away from the roadside! Do you know how fast you weren't going?"

Or:

A Pennsylvania State Police cruiser, cleverly hidden behind a billboard, clocks the wristwatch of a passing driver at 113 mph.

"I'm sorry, Miss, but your watch is entirely too fast today."

Or:

A Pennsylvania State Police cruiser stops a pick-up truck filled with rocks whose driver's talking on a cell phone and looking at his watch.

"Get out of the truck! Your rocks, your phone, your watch, all y'all got clocked in extreme excess of the legal local limit!"

Fantasy? Not entirely.

As my colleague Nicole Weisensee Egan reports in yesterday's *Daily News*, the state police has interesting episodes with radar guns.

Seems some are fault-prone (clocking, for example, roadside rocks at 70 mph or better) and the police know it and don't want anybody else to know it to the point when even the manufacturer offers a fix, the police say no, that's OK, we got it covered, no problemo.

This is somewhat understandable. If you're the police, you don't want holders of the 180,000 to 200,000 speeding tickets issued each year thinking, hey, wait, if speed guns don't work right, you know, I can get my money back - \$26 million in 2003.

The state police downplays the issue, says the guns are fine.

But this is the same agency caught last year downplaying years of sexual high jinks involving employees from the rank of major to (I'm not kidding) the cook at the academy.

So one could question credibility.

One could even get the idea of sex-crazed cops with bad speed guns.

"What seems to be the trouble, officer? And is that your speed gun or are you just happy to see me?"

Anyway, just like last year when it took an investigation by the state inspector general to get some action on the sex stuff, the inspector general got involved this year on radar guns.

You'll love this.

His report, which is not going to be released publicly, says: You know what? I'm no engineer. When it comes to radar I don't know, I suggest you get a study.

State police hires the University of Pittsburgh School of Engineering, which apparently feels the best way to do the study is in a lab and on a loading dock; in case, I guess, any speeders decide to drive by.

They point the gun at various objects: a Samsung A660 cell phone, which clocks at 150 mph, a sports watch with an Indiglo backlight, which clocks at 113 mph, proving, yep, false readings from objects.

What they don't do is take the gun out in a police car and point it at other cars. I mean, why would they, right?

When I ask, I'm told they acted within the scope of "the problem to be investigated," false readings from stationary objects, and that when operated properly on highways the guns work fine because cars block out "noise" from smaller objects and reflect an accurate speed read.

This is at odds with reports from troopers in the field, according to documents obtained by the *Daily News*, who say some guns go nuts when pointed at cars, too.

But, hey, the study only cost you \$18,000 and for fun you can go look at a radar gun pointed at a wristwatch on the state police

Web site, www.psp.state.pa.us. (At least yesterday, it was at the bottom of a list under "information center" on the home page.)

I ask Gov. Ed, who knows a thing or two about speeding, what he thinks of all this. To my disappointment, he doesn't want to play.

"First I've heard of it," he says at a press conference, and quickly pushes on to other questions.

A few things strike me: the Pitt study smells fishy; the state police focus, yet again, on cover-your-ass management more than dealing with problems and finding the truth; the inspector general's report should be released, and roadside rocks need to slow down.

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