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Glitches in the systems

Troopers cars' blamed for radar snafus

By NICOLE WEISENSEE EGAN
weisenn@phillynews.com

MOTOROLA ENGINEERS, concerned about crashing computer terminals in state police patrol cars, have found what they say is the source of electrical problems that some experts say cause radar guns to give faulty readings.

The Motorola experts say the police interceptor model Ford Crown Victoria - America's most popular cop car and the workhorse of the state police fleet - has "widespread vehicle power system problems" that have caused as many as a third of their laptop computers to crash suddenly.

State police own about 2,600 Crown Victorias.

A November 2004, Motorola report to the state police, a copy of which was obtained by the *Daily News*, summarizes a yearlong probe into why an unusual number of mobile Motorola computers in the police cars had problems.

The report concludes that the array of police lights, radios, computers and other power equipment overloads the cars' electrical system and introduces electrical noise, which interferes with the computers and radar guns.

The Motorola report has now become part of a whistleblower lawsuit filed against the state police by a former state police radar technician. The technician contends he was disciplined after he publicly testified in a speeder's trial that hand-held Genesis radar guns used by state cops sometimes clocked motionless roadside rocks at 70 mph.

State police brass insist that the radar guns work fine and deny that any motorists were given speeding tickets based on faulty equipment.

But motorists across the state have begun challenging their speeding tickets. Some prosecutors have withdrawn the charges rather than have the radar guns' accuracy challenged in court. The Motorola report is likely to bolster those appeals.

A state police spokesman declined to comment on the Motorola report.

State police at one time believed the radar guns were prone to malfunction only when plugged into the cigarette lighter of 2003 or 2004 Ford police cars. The Motorola report, though, says any Crown Victoria police car's electrical system can be trouble, especially in cars with older batteries.

State police have rejected the radar-gun manufacturer's offer of free portable battery packs for the guns.

It's unclear how widespread the Crown Victoria electrical troubles are. Cops in several local Pennsylvania departments say they've been beset by problems with their Fords.

But Ford says it knows of no radar or other electrical problems with its police car.

Dave Reuter, a Ford spokesman, said the police car's electrical system has been upgraded over the years, based on feedback from police agencies.

"Our main bottom line on this is that we've engineered a vehicle with very high capability," he said. "At no time should anyone overload a system beyond its capacity. There are limitations to all electrical systems as to the load that can be put on them."

Police chiefs in four South-central Pennsylvania towns said their Crown Victoria police cars have been plagued by electrical problems.

Chief David Duffy of the Newberry Police Department, in York County, said officers were having to jump-start cop cars with dead batteries so frequently that his department spent thousands installing double-battery systems in three cars.

Police chiefs in Upper and Lower Allen, in Cumberland County, near Harrisburg, and in the Northeastern Regional Police Department, in York County, also report problems with their Crown Victorias. Some of the fed-up cops have begun replacing their Fords with Chevrolet Impalas.

"I don't want my guys sitting in here, going out to get a car and the battery's dead," said Chief James Adams of the Upper Allen Police Department. "That could take an extra three to five minutes to jump-start and if you have a robbery or assault going on, that's not good."

Jason Jenkins, an Allentown lawyer, said he intends to use the Motorola report to challenge a client's speeding ticket. The lawyer lost a pre-trial challenge to the ticket, in

part because the trooper who wrote the ticket was driving a 2001 Ford Crown Victoria, which until the Motorola report was thought to be unaffected by the electrical problems.

"There's no doubt the radar guns are faulty," Jenkins said.

Motorola noticed problems in Pennsylvania in late-2002, about a year after it began installing computers in state police patrol cars. Motorola technicians were being called about 200 times a month to service the 1,186 mobile computers.

At the same time, state troopers were reporting phantom speed readings from Genesis hand-held radar guns, which plug into the cigarette lighter of the cars. The guns were clocking motionless objects at high speeds and were registering inaccurate speeds of moving cars, according to internal state police e-mails.

Motorola and the state police feared the mobile computers were somehow related to the radar-gun problems.

They discovered an electronic filter that appeared to solve the radar-gun problem.

Decatur Electronics, the radar-gun manufacturer, offered to install the filters for free. The company also offered free portable battery packs. According to state police e-mails, the agency rejected the offers, fearing publicity might suggest that motorists had gotten speeding tickets they did not deserve.

Meanwhile, Motorola experts discovered that the computer problem worsened in cars that idled for an extended period. The experts ultimately fingered the Ford's power system as the source of the problems, the Motorola report said.

Motorola recommended an alternate power source for the computers, like a dual battery pack that can fit into the trunk of the police cars.

The state police have not decided whether to buy dual battery packs, which cost several hundred dollars each, sources said.