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TRIBUNE-REVIEW**

State cops pulled a fast one on Pitt

By Eric Heyl**TRIBUNE-REVIEW***Friday, December 10, 2004*

For the past month, Pennsylvania State Police officials have been touting a recent University of Pittsburgh study as proof positive that their radar guns work properly.

Like a motorist with the flashing lights in the rearview mirror, perhaps they should stop.

The study was performed amid growing concerns that radar guns are inaccurate. If they are, the implications are enormous. And not just for the people who get the 200,000 speeding tickets handed out on state roadways each year.

If people can successfully challenge their tickets based on erroneous radar gun readings, the loss to state coffers could be in the millions.

Which explains why the state police were eager to publicize the findings of the \$18,000 study performed by Pitt's School of Engineering.

Commenting on the document when it was released last month, state police spokesman Jack Lewis said, "The bottom line is that our radar units are accurate. And if you receive a citation based on a radar reading, you can be sure that it is an accurate reading."

Contrast Lewis' remark with what Marlin Mickle, the Pitt engineering professor who directed the study, told me Thursday: "The goal of our study was not to ascertain the accuracy of the radar gun."

The study's primary goal, Mickle said, was to determine whether the alternators in state police cars might be causing false readings. Researchers ruled out that possibility.

Pitt also examined other possible causes and found that in close enough proximity to the radar gun, cell phones, Palm Pilots, digital cameras and wrist watches all can produce false readings.

"But none of those things would be particularly relevant to a state trooper along the highway," Mickle said.

Tools

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Maybe not.

But they would be particularly relevant in proving how easily false readings can happen.

This is a matter of some significance to Don Bailey, a Harrisburg attorney and former state auditor general. Bailey represents Tim Shingara, who was fired from his job as a radar technician for the state police shortly after testifying in court the radar gun sometimes malfunctions when plugged into state police car lighters.

"I believe (Pitt) has been victimized," Bailey said. "I believe it has been used and taken advantage of by people in the executive branch of our state government who are dishonestly trying to cover up the fact that there were faulty tickets handed out."

To test Bailey's theory that Pitt had been suckered, I asked Mickle whether the state police informed him of Shingara's whistle-blower lawsuit against the state police.

Or of e-mails Bailey subpoenaed from troopers to their superiors indicating the radar guns often don't work right.

Or published reports that the manufacturer of the radar guns had been rebuffed in its overture to the state police to fix the things.

Or the state police's desperate need to put some kind, any kind, of positive spin on its radar guns.

I didn't have to wait for a study to confirm my anticipated answer to the questions.

"I wasn't aware such things were going on," Mickle said.

Eric Heyl can be reached at eh eyl@tribweb.com or (412) 320-7857.



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