

Road Warrior: Motorists, bicyclists and police roll out their wish lists for 2016

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New Jersey towns caught red-light runners through a camera program that ended in 2014.

Officer Tim Franco offered one final wish as he left his job for the final time last week.

"Cameras," said Fair Lawn's retiring traffic safety officer.

Most cops love recent improvements in law-enforcement technology, especially surveillance cameras that provide powerful evidence for documenting shoplifters, cheats, liars and worse. But Franco likes them for recording what happens at busy intersections.

"Not just crashes," he said. "Close calls, too."

Police usually know crash details from accident reports. But unlike pilots who must report close calls to aviation authorities, it's rare for drivers or police to document events that almost happen - except when regaling colleagues or reporters about the harrowing experiences that nearly become the big events of their day.

But as Franco learned over his 31½-year career, these experiences have value beyond locker-room chatter.

That's because workplace bean counters figured out years ago that there are about 30 close calls for each accident. If cops and engineers had access to a huge sample of these "what ifs," as Franco calls them, they could be added to the small number of crashes they record. Doing so would add more precision to their ability to improve road safety - either through enforcement or through changes made in signage or the design of troublesome intersections.

"Right now, the system for gathering crash data is very limited," Franco said. "But the camera technology exists to do a better job,"

Cameras aren't cheap, however. Although federal money has recently become available to outfit local police with body cams, funds remain scant for adapting this technology to local crosswalks. So they remain only one of several traffic-safety initiatives on at least one ex-cop's year-end wish list.

"Maybe we'll get lucky in the new year," said Franco, who will keep pressing for similar advances on behalf of the 500-member New Jersey Police Traffic Officers Association, which he'll continue to head in retirement.

Cops aren't the only road warriors with New Year's wish lists. Here are a few more for 2016:

Pedaling peril

Although all traffic deaths in New Jersey fell nearly 2 percent last year, bicycle fatalities climbed to 18 - six of them in Bergen and Passaic counties. That 64 percent increase has again prompted a plea by the New Jersey Bicycle and Walking Coalition for passage of "Share the Road" legislation requiring drivers to give cyclists 3 feet of room when passing. Several other states now use this standard, but not the nation's most densely populated state - the one with 36,000 miles of roads that have been shoehorned into less than 9,000 square miles.

The coalition's wish-list bill has passed the Assembly but remains stuck in the Senate.

Hudson's example

In November, undercover cops on Routes 3 and 495 in Hudson County did something that readers like Fort Lee's Allen Kantorowitz have been wishing police in Bergen County would do on Route 4: They ticketed 20 minibus drivers for talking and texting on phones and other violations, including careless driving.

Issuing these summonses resembled a well-known process in which myopic gunmen fire accurately into barrels containing fish. This fishing expedition took only eight hours, according North Bergen police.

Kantorowitz has noticed these abuses for years.

"I dare you to & not see drivers counting money, talking on phones [or] stopping at non-bus stops," he said.

We, too, have noticed, photographed and publicized these practices. But unlike cops in North Bergen, we lacked the authority to do much more than wish for enforcement. Maybe others will follow their lead.

Ticket immunity

"End the PBA shields."

This wish has been pouring into this column for years, though wishers seldom are willing to sign their names.

Gary Tarczewski became an exception after he saw a driver risk the life of a pedestrian by flaunting her Police Benevolent Association credentials to muscle ahead of Tarczewski's car at a red-light crosswalk. "She was in no mood to obey the law," fumed the Bergenfield reader.

Len Rubin of Maywood also wishes police would "do away with the inane use of a shield that only indicates a driver donated to the PBA for special treatment."

Some cops agree - anonymously, of course. As one officer put it, "Preference undermines enforcement and morale."

Driving in the dark

For two decades, North Jersey road warriors have been complaining about the on-again, off-again lights along some stretches of Route 4 near the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee and Route 19 through Clifton and Paterson, but lately readers have extended their wish for better lighting to parts of Routes 46, 80 and 23, as well as local and county roads.

"Almost eerie," said Marcia Chapman of Wayne, who wishes her unlighted trips from 80 and 46 to Route 23 north weren't so dangerous. "It gets me so mad!"

Wayne's John Ehrlich echoes this gripe for the often-dark Route 80 & 95 interchange, as well as faded road markings on parts of Ratzler Road. "They're so bad that you can't even see them at night," he said.

"Egregious" is the way Carol deLyon describes a nighttime Wearimus Road trip from Ho-Ho-Kus to Hillsdale. It's "winding and & very difficult to navigate for my elderly parents," complained the Dumont reader.

Some of this darkness is attributed to vandalism, but not all. And state law generally protects government from liability, but not if it can be proven that a road peril was rooted in negligence, like ignoring persistent complaints.

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