

Friday, March 28, 2008

Police hand out 80 warnings in crosswalk crackdown

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Staff Writer

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*Staff Photo: Jason Braverman
Gwinnett County police officer Cynthia Hollis, dressed in plain clothing, has to scurry out of the way as a driver makes a turn onto South Norcross Tucker Road from Jimmy Carter Boulevard on Thursday morning. The driver was issued a warning and given educational material from GCPD during a sting operation.*

NORCROSS - Braving speedy taxi cabs, panel trucks and anxious commuters, Gwinnett police officer Cynthia Hollis weaved a web Thursday morning that ensnared more than 80 Gwinnett drivers.

But Hollis employed no speed-trap trickery. She just walked across the street.

Hollis acted as a plainclothes decoy Thursday during the first of several Gwinnett police crosswalk stings. For about two hours, Hollis walked back and forth across South Norcross-Tucker Road where it meets Jimmy Carter Boulevard - a notorious hot spot for erratic drivers and darting pedestrians.

Nine uniformed officers were lying in wait.

"It's a little bit intimidating," Hollis admitted during a break. "I'm a little surprised at how close people are cutting it."

All told, police wrote about 80 warnings and one ticket and made one arrest. Police gave all motorists pamphlets spelling out crosswalk rules. The crackdowns will continue in coming months at other busy Gwinnett intersections as a proactive measure to educate drivers, Sgt. A.C. Hutcherson said.

"Gwinnett's becoming a walking county - there's so many malls within walking distance to people's homes," Hutcherson said.

Pedestrian injury and fatality rates in Gwinnett are climbing, officials said. Last week, a woman crossing Jimmy Carter Boulevard near Interstate 85 was killed - hit twice by motorists as she used a crosswalk near a Denny's restaurant, said Hutcherson.

Grazing a pedestrian's hind quarters - or brushing them back from the front side - will not be tolerated, said Hutcherson.

The sting was part of a four-pronged crackdown across metro Atlanta on pedestrian law violators. Fulton and DeKalb police, as well as Georgia State University police, orchestrated similar stings Thursday.

In metro Atlanta, four pedestrians are hit by vehicles per day and 80 are killed per year, according to the Atlanta Regional Commission.

"The ideal outcome is that drivers wake up and their behaviors change," said Michael Orta, program manager for Pedestrians Educating Drivers on Safety. "Too many drivers just don't know the law."

The rules are basically this:

Georgia law mandates that drivers must stop for pedestrians before turning left or right at traffic lights. Drivers must also stop for pedestrians crossing in front of them, leaving at least one lane of opposite-direction traffic between the pedestrian and the vehicle before proceeding.

Apparently, the laws aren't common knowledge. Police had issued about 35 warnings in the first half-hour Thursday.

A 69-year-old Lawrenceville woman who identified herself as "Sara" had never been pulled over in 40 years behind the wheel, she said. That changed Thursday, when police waved her silver Buick Rendezvous to the curb.

Like many, Sara was clueless that turning in front of a crosswalk pedestrian was illegal.

"I didn't know that was the law," she said. "I didn't think I was doing anything."

Another woman in a Chevy HHR simply burst into tears.

But Orta, the PEDS program director, said citations aren't an end-all solution.

"This is a problem that cannot be solved by enforcement," he said. "Much of the responsibility rests with transportation engineering."

State and county traffic authorities "will put a road down lickety-split, but when it comes to putting down sidewalks, it's a different story," Orta said. "The infrastructure has not evolved with the needs of people on foot."

Hutcherson, the police sergeant, plans to urge Georgia Department of Transportation officials to incorporate more traffic islands in Gwinnett. As is, many crosswalks are spaced an inconvenient distance apart, he said.

