

South Carolina takes aim at work zone fatalities

By Bob Kudelka

Motorists speeding through a work zone in North Charleston this spring got a first-hand look at South Carolina's new campaign to lower fatalities in work zones.

In just six hours on April 13, area law enforcement issued 200 speeding citations to drivers in an Interstate 26 work zone. North Charleston Police, the state Highway Patrol and Charleston County Sheriff's Office teamed up for the "blitz wave" enforcement as part of the 2005 Work Zone Safety High Visibility Enforcement Campaign.

The 200 citations were more than the City of North Charleston Police Department usually writes in a month.

"We had 20 officers out there and they were stopping cars as fast as they could," said North Charleston Police Sgt. Richard Keys. "If we had 40 officers, we would have kept everybody busy all day long. We wrote a lot of six-point tickets. The judge went on TV and said he would not reduce points in court, so a lot of people's insurance went up."

North Charleston finished the month with more than 1,000 citations issued in work zones, with many speeds above 80 mph. One motorist was clocked at 108 mph, Key said.

"All their excuses were, 'I didn't see the sign,'" Keys said. "In this work zone there are 18 signs east and westbound."

The danger of work zones hit SCDOT with tragedy again as an employee in McCormick County suffered severe injuries in May.

At the North Charleston site, many of the highway workers approached the police officers and thanked them for being there.

Speeding continues to be a major problem, although after one month of writing \$440 tickets and handing out work zone safety brochures, Keys said motorists seem to be getting the message as speeds have slowed somewhat.

A motorist going the speed limit, 45 mph, will spend only eight seconds driving through the I-26 work zone, Keys said.

"If they'll take eight seconds out of their lives to slow down, they'd be sur-

prised how many lives could be saved," Keys said. "Instead, they spend an extra 10 minutes on the side of the road getting a citation."

Statewide during April 10-30, the 2005 Work Zone Safety High Visibility Enforcement Campaign resulted in nearly 6,000 tickets for violations ranging from speeding to DUI.

From April 10-30, there were 4,052 speeding tickets issued in work zones; 26 DUI arrests; 26 failure to yield violations; 25 following too closely; and 1,732 other violations. The total number of violations in work zones during this period was 5,861.

Enforcement waves were conducted by the SC Highway Patrol; Colleton County Sheriff's Office; Greenville Police Department; Lexington Police Department; Myrtle Beach Police Department; North Charleston Police Department; North Augusta Police Department; Pickens County Sheriff's Office; Oconee County Sheriff's Office; Simpsonville Police Department; Spartanburg County Sheriff's Office; Sumter Police Department; and York County Sheriff's Office.

The campaign is a joint partnership of the South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT), the South Carolina Department of Public Safety (SCDPS), the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), local law enforcement agencies, the SC Law Enforcement Networks, Carolinas Associated General Contractors (AGC) and the SC Municipal Association.

At a news conference April 8, in Columbia, federal, state and local officials launched the campaign aimed at improving work zone safety and lowering fatalities. Officials announced there would be four "blitz waves" for the high visibility enforcement effort planned during the next seven months.

"Effective immediately, law enforcement will be present in work zones to heighten awareness of driving behavior and to enforce the speed laws of our state

in this dangerous work environment," said James Schweitzer, Director of the South Carolina Department of Public Safety. "If you speed in a work zone in South Carolina, you will be ticketed."

During the past five years, almost 10,000 traffic crashes have been reported in work zones in South Carolina, resulting in thousands of injuries and 88 deaths. Nationally, four out of five people killed in work zones are drivers or passengers.

"It is critical that motorists obey the posted work zone speed limit, obey the standard traffic laws, and pay close attention to the road at all times, especially in work zones," said SCDOT Executive Director Elizabeth S. Mabry. "There is no excuse for a work zone collision - these events are totally preventable if motorists will simply obey the rules of the road."

Bob Lee, Administrator of the SC Division Office of the Federal Highway Administration, said South Carolina is being watched by other states across the nation as many others are interested in seeing the results that are achieved through this effort.

"This program is a national model for the efforts of a campaign of public awareness and information coupled with increased enforcement and a sincere commitment from all of the partners to stop the senseless tragedies occurring every day in our work zones and on our highways in South Carolina," Lee said.

State law provides for a \$200 fine and thirty days in jail for disregarding

work zone speed limits, where signs are posted.

Colonel Russell Roark, Commander of the South Carolina Highway Patrol, said the Patrol is looking forward to working with fellow law enforcement officers in the State Transport Police, and in the local law enforcement networks throughout the state to coordinate efforts.

"As the Commander of the South Carolina Highway Patrol, I commit to you that we will do everything within our power to make highway work zones safer," Roark said. "We recognize the hard work by DOT employees, highway contractors, and others, in all types of weather, to make our highways safer and more efficient. By maintaining a policy of zero tolerance for speeders in work zones and by slowing traffic down, we hope that your jobs will be less stressful, and that we will see zero fatalities during the 2005 construction season."

Danny Shealy, Director of Construction at SCDOT, said: "As you travel through work zones, we ask for your patience. Please watch out for our flaggers and obey their directions...Our employees and contractors are working for you, to help you reach your destination safely."

April 8 also was the beginning of a statewide TV public service campaign, and the new ads were shown at the news conference.

The news conference was held in support of National Work Zone Safety Awareness Week.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROB THOMPSON/THE CONNECTOR

SCDOT employees and law enforcement officers from across South Carolina joined SCDOT in an effort to reduce speeding and fatalities in highway work zones.