

Citizen-powered speed cameras identify new danger zones
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A computer scientist who has developed software to track vehicle speeds on Charlottesville streets is now gathering data from two more locations and wants city officials to take notice.

"The city has a problem with speeding, and the question is, how do you control it?" said Paul Reynolds, a professor emeritus at the University of Virginia who has been capturing speeds of vehicles on Locust Avenue since November.

Reynolds, who spent time early in his career developing software to track the movement of hurricanes, now works with residents in the Fry's Spring and Rugby neighborhoods to monitor their streets.

With nearly half a million data points collected at three locations, his research shows that between 70 percent and 80 percent of drivers exceed the 25 mph limit on Locust Avenue and Old Lynchburg Road.

"I have a camera on a hairpin turn on Rugby Road," Reynolds said. "I've seen cars hitting near 40 going through that curve, but not too often."

The new technology has also been welcomed by Jeanne Chase, a Fry's Spring resident who has campaigned to slow down drivers on Old Lynchburg Road for years.

"There should not have to be a police car along anybody's street to cause somebody to not kill another person on a residential street," Chase said. "We've already had one child killed. We've had two children

injured.”

City officials thus far have said they won’t be using the citizen-collected data to make decisions on road planning or enforcement.

“We applaud the citizens on their effort in using cameras to capture speeding in their neighborhoods,” said Alexander Ikefuna, the city’s director of neighborhood development services. “We can look at the data but traffic decisions will be made using established data collection systems by the traffic engineering profession.”

A spokesman for the Charlottesville Police Department said Reynolds and other residents are welcome to install the cameras, but they cannot be used for enforcement purposes because the equipment is not certified.

“The vehicles are in the public view on a city street so I do not believe any privacy restrictions are being violated,” said Lt. Steve Upman.

Upman said the police department routinely follows up on speeding-related complaints throughout the city.

“We receive complaints from neighborhoods and citizens in regards to speeding and deploy traffic enforcement efforts in those areas to not only confirm the problem but also conduct enforcement in an attempt to change people’s driving habits,” Upman said.

Jeff Speck, a nationally recognized expert on street design, said Reynolds’ evidence does not surprise him at all.

“Most people speed on most streets, because traffic engineers think that the way to make a street safe is to design it for a speed above the posted speed,” Speck said. “This is highway thinking misapplied to urban places.”

Speck said speed can be deadly for people living along residential streets.

“You are eight times as likely to die when hit by a car traveling 35 mph than one driving 25 mph,” Speck said. “Some drivers will always speed, but designing streets so narrow that speeding feels dangerous is the most important first step. Parallel parking helps, as do street trees and bike lanes.”

Speck said speed cameras have been effective in other communities that have installed them.

Ikefuna, who worked as a planner in Savannah, Georgia, for 14 years, said government-operated speed cameras there helped to improve public safety, with revenue generation as a secondary effect.

“Acquiring such system requires a lot of logistics and could have legal ramifications if the state does not allow cities to use that kind of surveillance camera on the public,” Ikefuna said.

Reynolds said the city has an existential crisis on its hands as Charlottesville streets become more crowded because of increased development downtown.

“Are we just kidding when we put up 25 mph signs?” he asked. “Do we mean it is OK to go 40 because we’re not going to chase you unless you’re over 40? If that’s it, let’s be open about it because then I

think a lot of the residents will make different decisions about whether they want to stay here or not.”

Chase said the data from the cameras give her evidence to take to city officials and others who might be able to help reduce speeding.

“If I can show you the hard data and it shows you the speed, the time of the day and the vehicle, then maybe you will be more inclined to help, but now it’s on your plate to do something,” she said.

To help raise awareness of the issue, Reynolds has created a website to publicize his data and his campaign to reduce speeding. The site documents his efforts to convince the city to step up enforcement and it provides links to his data.

In February, Reynolds asked the City Council to adopt a resolution requiring city employees to maintain the speed limit at all times.

“City Council chose not to even entertain that resolution in a public forum,” he said.

As the city considers traffic-calming initiatives to slow down vehicles, Reynolds said his system demonstrates that such measures often don’t work. The city recently invested millions to make Old Lynchburg Road a safer street but Reynolds said it may not have worked.

“It’s got sidewalks, it’s got narrow lanes, it’s got flashing lights on its crosswalks, it’s got concrete medians, it’s got gentle chicanes,” Reynolds said. “It has naturally blind curves in it and I can show you images of people going 59 miles an hour on a street with bump-outs.”