

Blitzkrieg on Interstate 95

By Greg Mauz, Florida Activist

One summer morning before most commuters were even awake, a man was dozing behind the wheel of his small car while heading north on Interstate 95 in Palm Beach County, Florida. His alert wife grabbed the wheel, over-compensated, and steered into an 18-wheeler. The truck overturned and dumped its toxic fluid, forcing the closure of the highway for 36 hours.

Weeks passed. Other wrecks followed, including one where a college student reading a book hit another loaded semi. Closed the freeway—again. Angered people—again.

Phones rang off the hook at the county commissioners office. Fueled by the media, truckers became Public Enemy Number 1. The fact that the vast majority of the car-truck crashes were the fault of the car drivers was conveniently lost in the hysteria.

Somehow the tide turned and speed became the problem. A reporter for a local paper berated speeding “idiots.” He said speed was the cause of all the problems on I-95, yet not even one statistic was presented for evidence. Overzealous enforcement was demanded, and now.

John Cerasari, the local Florida DOT manager of community traffic programs doesn't even drive on I-95. Yet he became the enforcer of the double-nickel on that very road. Florida DOT records show over 64% of the vehicles are exceeding 55, a low estimate in John's opinion. He said “Voting with your right foot doesn't count.”

The U.S. DOT provided \$250,000 for a speed enforcement project—\$125,000 to the Florida Highway Patrol for extra troopers and 45 new, high-tech radar guns. The balance paid for laser guns to local police who normally don't patrol I-95 but

couldn't resist the smell of money.

The blitzkrieg was officially scheduled for a January 3 kickoff. However, the grant was delayed by the federal budget crisis. The police promised to begin the campaign with their “antiquated” weapons, grant or no grant.

January 3, “D-day” for the speed enforcers was a washout. Rain pummeled the area all morning and into the afternoon. Shortly after the sun appeared, a high school student entering the highway failed to yield and collided with a large truck. That, more than the cops, slowed down everyone for the rest of the day.

The grant finally arrived during the third week of January. Enforcement intensity was unparalleled in I-95's history. One dozen Boca Raton cops had nine people pulled over in a one-mile stretch. Broward County sheriff's deputies were hiding on overpasses, shooting lasers down the freeway, pursuit cars waiting. Palm Beach deputies ran speed traps well into the night. This highway was under siege.

The media proclaimed a victory! From December 12 through January 6, accidents on I-95 were down from 186 to 150. The Palm Beach Post reported 1,221 tickets were written between January 1 through the 25, of which 918 were for speeding. Not mentioned was the slow start to this year's tourist season.

The perception is that speed kills and I-95 is the most dangerous road in the country. In Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties, excessive speed caused 1,919 of the 129,602 crashes, and 100 of the 1,384 deaths in 1994, according to the state. Simply put, only 1.5% of accidents and 7% of fatalities were caused by excessive speed. Furthermore, the Palm Beach County Traffic Board recorded over 43,000 accidents in 1994, but only 1,134 were on I-95.

Results: 12,000+ tickets. Crashes decreased 6% but, fatalities rose +14% from 50 in 1995 to 57 in 1996.

That equates to an average of 3 accidents a day on I-95 versus 115 a day on the other roads in Palm Beach County. Yet I-95 carries vastly more traffic than any other road in southern Florida.

In all of Palm Beach County, speed caused an estimated 650 accidents. Compare that to 13,006 careless driving, 7,012 failure to yield, and 2,021 improper lane change accidents. Or compare 1,919 speeding crashes in the tri-county area to 65,000 car thefts. Speed enforcement received that \$250,000 grant. The grant to combat car thefts was a mere \$100,000. There are no eager volunteers in uniform to stop that epidemic.

While a car thief serves no sentence, receives no points on his license, and suffers no insurance surcharges, just the opposite is true for “speeders.” A citation for 75 in a 55 will lighten your wallet by \$150 and add 4 points to your license, plus hefty insurance surcharges. In a further twist of irony, if you fail to yield properly and crash into someone, you're only out \$69.

Florida cops wrote over 759,000 speeding tickets in 1994 resulting in a jackpot of well over \$75 million. Each citation feeds no less than ten government agencies, with the first half of the money going to the local town where the “infraction” occurred.

So while perception is shot with radar and laser, reality continues. January 30, 3:30 AM: A car on I-95 hits a guard rail and ricochets into the path of—you guessed it, a semi. By noon, two other non speed-related crashes tied up other sections of the road for hours.

Not to worry, officials remind us, the safety campaign (speed enforcement) is working. ☺