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D.C. considers recruiting 'citizen cops' to serve as parking, traffic enforcers

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District of Columbia officials are so desperate for more solutions to the city's parking and traffic problems that they're considering recruiting residents to help enforce the rules of the road.

A proposal before the D.C. Council would allow up to 80 regular residents, 10 in each ward, to issue tickets to vehicles parked where they aren't allowed — blocking crosswalks, in bike lanes, in front of bus stops.

They would be the city's eyes and ears in the neighborhoods, spotting parking violators, documenting infractions with photos and issuing citations. Think of them as resident enforcers, said Councilman Charles Allen, the proposal's chief sponsor.

It's a concept that's been tried in other U.S. cities, where officials say it helps beef up enforcement while allowing police to focus on more serious crime.

But critics say these "citizen cops" are a recipe for disaster.

The plan, critics say, could put residents at risk of unnecessary confrontations, increase favoritism and discrimination in traffic crackdowns and hurt the impartiality generally associated with traffic enforcement.

Though unconventional, Allen hopes the Citizen Safety Enforcement program could be a resource to reduce troubling road behaviors that put people's lives at risk. The intent of the pilot program, he said, is to improve road safety — along with two dozen other initiatives included in a comprehensive transportation bill he introduced this month.

Traffic fatalities are a major problem, Allen said, mentioning that there were 36 victims last year and 12 so far this year. About half of the victims were pedestrians or bicyclists.

"We should be acting with a greater sense of urgency, and we should be willing to try new things, because what we have been doing hasn't stopped people from dying," Allen said.

Several other cities have or are experimenting with the resident-enforcement concept, recruiting — and paying residents — to rat out traffic violators.

New York last year created a reward program for residents to report idling vehicles, providing a platform where they can file complaints along with photos and video evidence of offenders. Tipsters can receive up to 25% of the fines generated by their report. The program aims to enforce a law that prohibits idling while parked, as part of a clean-air effort.

In the Los Angeles area, a program known as Volunteers on Patrol trains residents to enforce parking regulations, issue parking citations, and help with traffic control and emergency response

in Malibu. The city's officials say the program is invaluable: Last year, its 18 volunteers contributed 7,516 patrol hours and wrote 9,140 tickets.

"All of which is time that the sheriff's deputies don't have to do that, and can spend time ensuring public safety, chasing criminals and keeping the roads safe," Malibu spokesman Matt Myerhoff said.

Malibu's program is more structured than what the D.C. legislation envisions: Uniformed volunteers patrol the city in three marked L.A. County Sheriff's Department vehicles, outfitted with pretty much everything a sheriff's deputy squad car has, but not weapons. They direct traffic when lights are out or when crashes block lanes. They report suspicious activities, drunken driving, speeding and reckless driving to the sheriff's deputies. During the Woolsey Fire in November, the largest in L.A. County history, the volunteers assisted in the evacuation of 250,000 people, and during recent flooding and mudslides, they helped patrol the streets and clear debris from roadways.

Gabe Klein, a former transportation chief in D.C. and Chicago, said the concept of using residents to help with enforcement is an innovative solution to the growing traffic problems many cities are facing. It's also an example of the move toward "participatory government," in which the public is involved in providing a service.

"This is about people being able to participate, making the streets safer," said Klein, co-founder of the city advisory practice Cityfi. "Eyes on the street makes streets safer in terms of crime. There's no reason why we can't apply the same principles to vehicular crime, which causes fatalities."

Successful programs, Klein said, could help cities struggling with funding to provide needed services. And the resident ticket-writers can be more than just enforcers, he said.

"Knowing that anybody out there could be eyes on the street giving you a ticket," could be a deterrent for bad road behavior, Klein said.

The success of such a program, some experts said, relies on how well it is crafted. Thorough review of the citations by qualified law enforcement officers, for example, would reassure the public that tickets are being issued fairly and accurately - as would safeguards to prevent abuse. Allen's proposal establishes fines for any resident enforcer who "knowingly submits false information" and lets anyone else, not authorized, use the app to issue fines.

Others say most people would prefer enforcement be left to trained, public employees.

"Public officials may be far from perfect ... but there is that extra layer that at least you can train them and they are likely to have the time on the job that allows them to build up their expertise," said Walter Olson, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. They also have protocols to follow — and a job at stake.

"The cellphone evidence can go a long way, but it still doesn't always tell the whole story," he said. "A lot of times you are going to have people who are genuinely guilty and you will be enforcing the law as it was intended to be enforced. But traffic enforcement does have a lot of judgment calls."

But Olson says he can see why the practice would be attractive to cities.

"The city gets more revenue without having to pay salaries," he said. "The potential increase in ticket revenue would get their interest right away."

Allen said the idea is not to give residents a platform to ticket neighbors or enemies. It would be limited to specific violations, and those selected for the program would be trained and certified. As is the case with other city tickets, recipients would have the right to appeal.

Allen said the extra enforcement could help address some concerns about parking problems that can create dangerous conditions.

"If I am trying to cross the street and [your] car is blocking the crosswalk, you have forced me to walk into traffic. That is when accidents happen," Allen said. "If you block my bus stop, I now have to step into the street to board my bus and the bus has to stop in the middle of the roadway, impacting everybody else and their safety."

The resident-enforcers provision is included in a bill introduced by Allen, with seven sponsors and three co-sponsors. The bill is before the panel's transportation committee, pending a hearing date. The legislation would include a citywide ban on right-on-red turns, would lower city speed limits to 20 mph, and would provide for fines for contractors who don't restore crosswalks and bicycle lanes after completing work.

Although some D.C. residents are asking where they can sign up, others say it's inviting trouble.

"The idea of vigilante enforcement is a bad idea," D.C. attorney David Tompkins said. "Everyone I don't like would have a lot of tickets. Well, that's the joke until a real jerk gets ahold of this idea."

Leave the enforcement to police, Tompkins said.

"Law enforcement is a profession," he said. "Have professionals handle it."

But resident Kyle Cole, who rides scooters and bikes, said too many drivers are blocking bike lanes and crosswalks, creating dangerous situations for riders like him.

When such incidents are reported to the city's 311 service or the Department of Public Works, which is charged with parking enforcement, that enforcement usually arrives too late.

"Someone shows up in an hour and the car is gone," Cole said. Allen's proposal "will give us a tool," he said.

In an illustration of the problems cyclists face, advocates fanned out across the city last week, using cellphones to document cars illegally parked in bike lanes, blocking crosswalks and on curbs. They reported 716 violations on the How's My Driving app, which tracks infractions and checks license plates for outstanding fines. More than 4,000 infractions and more than \$1.5 million in outstanding fines have been reported through the app since January.

Robert Gardner, advocacy director at the Washington Area Bicyclist Association, said residents have to report the problems because enforcement has lagged. In recent years, city data shows, traffic control officers have issued fewer citations for traffic violations involving bike lanes, he said.

"It's good that council member Allen is looking at innovative solutions to get to this problem, to try to stop people from parking in the bike lanes and from obstructing crosswalks and bus stops, however it is also unfortunate that this even needs to happen," he said.