Drivers detour around police using high-tech apps

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Drivers looking to avoid pricey citations for traffic offenses such as red-light camera violations and speed trap busts are turning to technology to level the playing field.

As red-light cameras proliferate around the United States and cash-starved police agencies pump up coffers with traffic ticket revenue, many drivers are using devices and applications that give them a heads-up when it's time to stop or slow down. Among them: Cobra's iRadar, which can connect with an iPhone; Trapster, an application that relies on information reported by other users, and Fuzz Alert, which works with iPhones and iPads.

One of the most popular is PhantomAlert, an online database that drivers can download to GPS devices or smartphones. It uses audible alerts to warn drivers about everything from speed and red-light cameras to speed traps, school zones and DUI checkpoints.

The devices' DUI checkpoint feature - which sends alerts about drunken driving locations that have been reported by other drivers - is troubling for some police agencies. "If people are going to use those, what other purpose are they going to use them for except to drink and drive?" says Capt. Paul Starks of the Montgomery County (Md.) Police Department.

"They're only thinking of one consequence and that's being arrested. They're not thinking of ending the lives of other motorists, pedestrians, other passengers in their cars or themselves."

Officer Brian Walters, who runs the red-light camera program for Virginia Beach, has a different take: "I'm all for them," he says. "A couple of GPS companies have sent me requests to verify and validate where our cameras are. I helped them." He says the devices and apps make drivers more aware. "If that's what gets them to comply, that's fine," he says.

Dennis Ricketts, a retired firefighter in Newport News, Va., bought a lifetime subscription to PhantomAlert about 1 1/2 years ago for his TomTom GPS navigation system. He says the device has made him even more aware. "A lot of times when people drive, they're not paying a lot of attention, especially if it's a road you drive on repeatedly," he says. "With this, you are a lot more aware of everything that's going on, and on things that might be coming up."

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