

Curbing speeders near schools

By Kevin Clerici
Staff Writer

Vacaville is about to power up its latest effort to get motorists to power down around schools.

In a move unprecedented in Solano County, city traffic engineers have used a special grant to purchase electric display signs that have a brain. The signs sense an approaching vehicle and illuminate for the driver the speed.

The idea is to make drivers aware of how fast they're traveling — and of the legal 25mph limit — in an effort to get the two to match. The units don't write tickets, but each has a camera to record data.

"Most drivers pay little attention to speed limit signs and drive at a rate they consider comfortable," traffic engineer Chris Bailey said. "We hope this opens a few eyes."

The experimental signs, which use radar, were paid for by a Safe Route to School grant. The grant also paid for dozens of reflector panels recently installed on stop signs.

The traffic slowing devices are the city's newest tools in a continuous battle against speeding and cut-through traffic in sensitive school zones.

Crews this week installed one of the 15 units on Wrentham Drive outside Browns Valley Elementary School. The unit should be activated in coming days, Bailey said, and will operate for two hours during the morning and again during the afternoon.

Assistant principal Marcia Bjerken said it's a welcomed addition to the two-lane street, which provides access to the school's pick-up zone.

"We've got more than 800 kids, so before and after school is amazingly busy," she said. "Anything that slows down traffic and protects our children is a great idea."



Brad ZweerInk/The Reporter

Casey DeLancy, with Steiny and Company in Vallejo, mounts a speed-control sign Monday on a light pole near Vacaville's Browns Valley Elementary School.

The signs should be a help to monitors who the school provides to keep traffic flowing and students out of harm's way.

"I think a lot of people are just not aware of the speed they are going," Bjerken added.

The 50-pound units are noiseless, cost about \$5,500 each and stand 4-feet tall and about 2 1/2-feet wide. In areas where it wasn't feasible to run an electric line, officials ordered a solar-powered model.

They were first used in San Jose three years ago. According to Bailey, an effectiveness study found traffic slowed 5 to 7 miles per hour in zones where the units were located.

Connie Rojas, a clerk at San Jose's Erikson Elementary School the last eight years, said she doesn't need scientific data to know the devices work. A school guard

was hit by a speeding motorist several years ago, she said, but no accidents have occurred since the signs showed up.

"There used to be a lot of speeding drivers," she said Thursday by telephone. "(The display sign) has made a noticeable difference. Your community is really going to like them. It has just been much calmer here."

Bailey, who learned of the signs at a traffic seminar, warns they are not an end-all to speeding. Drivers still have to make the conscience decision to slow down. It's something traffic officials intend to track across town. While some fear drivers may abuse the radar to see how fast their vehicle can go, the city is confident in its new high-tech devices.

Said Bailey "This is an innovative idea that I think we got on board with at the right time."