

Double dings

Stow police accident fee targets the wrong problem

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Stow Police Chief Lou Dirker and the City Council thought they had a great idea, charging at-fault motorists a fee when police are called to a traffic accident. Accident reports are of greater value to insurance companies than to local police, Dirker reasoned, so why not start socking it to them?

Trouble is, most insurance companies wouldn't pay. The city's collection company then billed the drivers. One Brimfield driver, who assumed he was doing the right thing by calling Stow police, was recently billed \$276, after paying a \$125 fine.

The program has several practical problems. The ordinance assessing the fees makes no distinction between Stow residents (who pay taxes for police services) and non-residents. Also, fault is assessed from the police report. It hasn't happened yet, but somebody could contest a citation in court and win. Would the fee then be reimbursed? Nobody knows.

The fees are really a symptom of a larger problem, small police forces struggling to make ends meet. Stow, with one officer per 1,000 residents, is at half-strength compared to the state average. Money for expansion has not been forthcoming.

There is a better way, and Stow is pursuing it, working with six communities on a joint dispatching center. Stow could spend as much as \$800,000 on a new center of its own. Dirker estimates a joint center would save the city \$400,000. Other communities are considering similar arrangements, including contracts with the county sheriff.

And how much are those accident fees bringing in? Since June, \$2,615.