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Sensors and insensibility

State is asked to pay for traffic info taxpayers already funded

Published on: 08/29/07

Last year, the Georgia Department of Transportation signed a deal that could force local drivers to pay for traffic information that they ought to be getting for free.

In fact, if highway robbery were legalized, it might look something like this:

Several years ago, Congress earmarked \$50 million that states and cities could use to install solar-powered traffic sensors in roads and highways. However, the money came with a catch: It could only be used to hire a company called Traffic.com. Here in metro Atlanta, the Georgia DOT signed a deal with Traffic.com to lay 80 miles of its sensors around the urban area.

Under the deal, however data collected from the sensors won't be available to the public or even to the state DOT. Traffic.com intends to sell the most detailed bits of information collected by its road sensors to travelers who buy its on-board navigational system, which displays real-time traffic updates about wrecks and stalls. And as DOT officials belatedly learned, the company's deal also gives it the right to charge the state agency for the most pertinent and valuable traffic information gleaned from its road sensors.

For example, a top DOT engineer had hoped to use Traffic.com's technology to gather data that would be posted on existing electronic traffic signs and to supplement a new, free 511 service to help drivers get around.

"The deal for Georgia DOT was very attractive," said Mark Demidovich, a state traffic engineer who brokered the deal without reading the fine print closely enough. "We could get all these sensors at no cost to us or the state," since the federal government would be paying the cost.

Instead, the DOT will have to pay to access premium traffic information from the company, at a price that is now being negotiated.

At the federal level, the story of the \$50 million appropriation to Traffic.com is a classic example of pork-barrel politics. The Pennsylvania company had a helpful patron in Bud Shuster, a Pennsylvania congressman who until 2001 chaired the House Transportation Committee. Later, Traffic.com hired 10 lobbying firms to advance its cause, including one headed by a former top Shuster aide. According to The Hill, a newspaper specializing in covering Congress, Traffic.com under various names has spent more than \$900,000 on lobbying fees since 2000.

In effect, Traffic.com was given start-up capital using public funds to create a product which it is now selling back to the public at a profit. Getting a sucker to pay for something — using his own money, no less — is one of the oldest con games in the book, and one of the more profitable as well.

— Lyle V. Harris, for the editorial board

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