

Friday, 20th February 2009 – www.timesofmalta.com

New speed cameras are just cash cows, experts say

Matthew Xuereb

Traffic experts agree that the speed cameras soon to be installed, imposing a speed limit of just 60 kilometres per hour, are simply "cash cows" and that their positioning does not make sense.

They complained that rather than installing speed cameras, the Malta Transport Authority (ADT) ought to embark on a rigorous educational campaign on speeding.

The general feeling among motorists is that the cameras, which will be placed on eight major roads, are mere revenue generators for cash-strapped councils.

But speaking to The Times earlier this week, a spokesman for the ADT defended its decision to lower the speed limit on these roads, even when the country's Highway Code establishes the national speed limit on main roads at 80 km/hr and 50 km/hr in inhabited areas.

The spokesman said the Highway Code was just "an advisory guidance booklet for motorists, not the law". Legally binding speed limits are determined by the signs set up on the road after having been established according to the specific safety requirements of that particular road.

The ADT insisted that the speed limits set will "ensure the safety of the driver, passengers, pedestrians and all other road users".

Two of the new cameras will be positioned on the Birkirkara Bypass, one of them next to Klikk Computers and another near the roundabout leading to Birkirkara. The two exits of the Sta Venera tunnels will each have a camera and another two will be placed on Mdina Road, Qormi, one next to Shopwise and the other next to Kia Motors. One camera will be installed in either direction on Tal-Barrani Road in Żejtun.

However, traffic expert Hugh Arnett, who was involved in the decision to install speed cameras in Attard and on the Coast Road, said the new speed cameras were "definitely cash traps" which were going to increase the number of tail-gate accidents.

He said he agreed with their positioning at the Santa Venera tunnels but not with the others. The cameras on the Birkirkara bypass "are stupidly placed" and with the wrong speed limit.

"The cameras will be placed on incredibly busy roads where no particularly serious accidents take place. These roads were built to take speed. A speed of 60 km/hr is childish.

"And why was this speed limit chosen? It is obvious that it was done to catch more people and collect more money. We should be encouraging motorists to drive better at faster speeds rather than reducing the speed limit as much as we can to get more cash," he said.

He said that with a speed limit of 60 km/hr, motorists will be driving through that part of the road at 45 to 50 km/hr "just in case". This would be slowing down traffic tremendously and creating traffic jams.

Mr Arnett added that in order to be effective, speed cameras should be installed and left there for a maximum period of 18 months, before being moved to another location.

Traffic expert and lawyer Simon Micallef Stafrace, who is appointed as a court expert for traffic-related inquiries, also dubbed the new speed cameras as cash traps. "They definitely do not make sense, especially without an educational campaign to go with their introduction," he said.

Dr Micallef Stafrace said that in his career as a court expert, he could only recall one case which involved over speeding. Most of the accidents occur due to tiredness, he said.

Even television personality Tonio Darmanin, of Paqpaq fame, agreed that the speed cameras were simply revenue generators. In principle he agreed with speed cameras but he disagreed with the way they are being installed without a proper educational campaign.

He said the revenue generated by these cameras should not go to the local council but into a fund to finance such educational campaigns. A limit of 60 km/hr was far too low for these roads that have been chosen, he insisted.

Meanwhile, the Chamber of Small and Medium Businesses yesterday wrote to the Transport Minister and the ADT chairman describing the new speed cameras as "highway robbery".

The chamber said they are causing an unnecessary expense to distributors and other transport professionals who used the roads regularly.

However, in its reply, the ministry said it would not interfere in the location and the limits set by speed cameras, insisting that this fell within the competence of the ADT's technical staff.