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Area school buses will soon be armed with interior and exterior security cameras

Officials aim to capture stop-sign-arm violators, curb in-bus poor behavior

Natalie Ryder
Community Editor

A grant from the Minnesota Department of Public Safety is helping equip Forest Lake's 109 school buses with cameras on their stop sign arms, aiming to crack down on drivers who fail to stop for buses. The Forest Lake Area School District received a \$270,575 grant this past year and will install them over the summer.

"If we were going to do this, we wanted to outfit all of our buses, because if we're going to do it, we're going to do it right," Forest Lake school resource officer Tom Coulter said.

Coulter said the cameras will allow bus drivers to instantaneously and accurately capture drivers who violate the bus stop sign law, which requires drivers to stop and wait for buses when dropping off or picking up children, or when stopping for railroad crossings.

He applied for the grant when



Photo by Natalie Ryder

Forest Lake school resource officer Tom Coulter receives one or two school bus stop arm violations per week, and he hopes the installation of stop arm cameras will curb violations.

he discovered the state was offering more funding toward this project, since he has received this same grant for a school district at which he was previously employed.

"We want to make sure our kids are safe, that everybody gets home safe and that our drivers aren't taxed," Coulter said.

Typically, he receives one to two stop arm violation reports a week from bus drivers. Coulter said violation reports from this school year totaled around 60

the last time he checked, but that number isn't accurate because many violations go unreported due to a lack of information bus drivers can retain about the vehicle.

"I've been told by drivers that there's generally like 1-of-5 violations that they are actually able to get all of the information [needed for a report]," Coulter said.

Currently without the cameras, bus drivers have to document the license plate, describe the car

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Local wins prize packages worth \$33,000 on 'Let's Make a Deal'

Retired microbiologist headed on dream vacation to Galapagos after winning show's big prize

Hannah Davis
News Editor

A bit of boredom and a lack of internet led to a big win for a new Forest Lake resident on the daytime show "Let's Make a Deal," which aired on June 7. Dawn Sturtz, a recently retired FDA microbiologist from Iowa, ended up winning three prize packages totaling a \$33,000 value, including a lifetime dream vacation to the Galapagos Islands.

"I started crying," she said about the moment she won, and said at the time, "Stuff like this doesn't happen to me."

Sturtz moved from Iowa to Forest Lake in September to be close to her daughter and son-in-law, Minnetonka

residents who were expecting their first child in early 2022. While she was waiting for internet service at her new house to get hooked up, she'd spend her free mornings watching daytime TV. She began to watch a childhood favorite: "Let's Make a Deal!"

"I can remember as a kid when Monty Hall was on. It was always so fun. The people would have their purses and bags full of safety pins and Band-Aids to see if they would get called on. I was a fan when I was a kid," she said. "I was up here with no internet, and it was winter in Minnesota, so I'm watching daytime television."

On one of the shows, she saw a blurb flash across the screen, saying the show was looking for new contestants. She went to the website, and filled out the application, and quickly got a call back by a producer asking to do a virtual interview.

"I didn't even have in-

Sturtz see page 4

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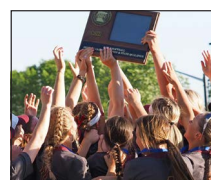
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News

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Bus cameras

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and describe the driver to give law enforcement enough information to investigate the stop arm violation.

“They’re a little time-consuming because it’s – you know – tracking down an owner, verifying all of that, and then trying to get the driver, ... then verifying the story. Oftentimes, that doesn’t match up,” Coulter explained.

He estimates that about a quarter of the reported bus driver reports don’t make it past preliminary investigation because the car description and license plate information doesn’t match any vehicles in the police system.

“So then now we have nothing, absolutely nothing, to go on,” Coulter said.

When the information reported by driv-

ers is correct, it is easy for the officers to track down violators, so Coulter is looking forward to the more streamlined process next school year.

The stop arm cameras will always be recording when in use, similar to police car cameras, according to Coulter, and the driver will hit a button to timestamp the moment a driver violates the stop sign. When the button is pressed, a few minutes before and after will be packaged into a clip and sent to the transportation department for review.

“Having the video footage of ‘Here’s your violation, here’s the vehicle plate, here’s the driver’ – all of that is such great evidence for us to take with us to help our investigation, and we can take that with us to court,” Coulter said.

Camera footage filmed throughout the day will be unloaded

onto servers after morning routes or evening routes, but pinged camera footage of violations will be specifically noted, so it can be easily accessed and downloaded by the Forest Lake Police Department for their investigation.

“They’ll maintain the server and the security of the server and the access to the server. And then we basically will just sign into this site and be able to download the violation or the event and then take it from there and do the investigation,” Coulter explained.

The district’s transportation office will continue to manage the reports and forward them to the proper authorities who will handle the investigation going forward – for now, that means Coulter and two other school resource officers.

Since the district

reaches into other cities like Wyoming, Scandia and Lino Lakes, the transportation department will coordinate violations with those police departments when they occur in those geographic areas.

“Once people know that ‘Hey, these buses have cameras on them,’ ... that’ll help stop the violations,” Coulter said.

Interior cameras to monitor rider, driver behavior

On top of installing the stop arm cameras, the district plans to install interior bus cameras in an effort to curb poor behavior on buses.

“I’ll hear from [the drivers] all the time that the behavior of the students and the other drivers – and the stop arm violations – are the two things that they’re worried about the most,” Coulter said.

“If you can take that

component out of the driver’s [job], give them some peace of mind when they’re driving, I think that’s going to be so nice and so helpful,” he added.

Interior camera footage will capture the conduct of riders and drivers – student misbehavior will be handled through the school the student attends, not through law enforcement.

“It’ll be a good tool for the schools, and I think not only the schools will feel better about it, but I think the parents and the children that are riding the bus will also feel safer,” Coulter said.

Without cameras, schools currently investigate incidents involving student or driver misconduct through interviewing individuals who witnessed the incident. Coulter hopes the cameras solve those challenges in the future.

During the school

board meeting on Thursday, June 2, board member Rob Rapheal inquired about the need for new policies regarding how the interior bus camera footage will be used and who has access to it.

The district’s transportation director, John Gray, is contacting other school districts to see their policies about the usage and access interior camera footage will have and to whom.

“That way we can look at what other districts have and what’s going to be the best thing for us,” Coulter said.

During the first school board meeting in June, the board approved the bus camera project at \$285,061, about \$14,000 more than the grant budget. The exterior and interior cameras are projected to be installed before the 2022-2023 school year.



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