

## Watchdog: Problems with school bus camera tickets must be addressed

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Watchdog

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Show no mercy to drivers who pass school buses when buses are stopped and stop signs are showing. It's a \$300 ticket in Dallas, but state law changed last year to allow a maximum fine of \$1,250. Now with cameras mounted on the outside of some school buses, the evidence against violators is often indisputable.

But show mercy to folks who get caught up in the bureaucracy of these new camera-based enforcement technologies when something goes wrong. I've heard from hundreds of people who complain about imperfect toll road cameras and red-light cameras. Sometimes what they say is actually true.

My sympathy lies not with ticket jumpers but those who try to ask questions and point out flaws. But these people can get lost in a ticket-happy "customer service" bureaucracy that sometimes is outsourced away from accountable local governments.

Joan Chandler is one of those people. She tangled with Dallas County Schools, an agency that serves Dallas County's 14 school districts and manages bus systems for many of them.

In January, Chandler received a letter from a collection agency demanding payment for a school bus stop arm camera violation that occurred a year before. A \$300 fine jumped to \$422. She couldn't appeal because a deadline had passed.

"This was the first I heard about it," she says of the violation. Dallas County Schools sends out citations by regular mail after photos of violators are reviewed by the Dallas County Schools Police Department.

Chandler wrote several letters to Dallas County Schools, but no one ever answered. She wanted to ask why she was being charged. She says the bus she passed was in a long line by the side of the road without flashing lights.

Again, I'm not defending that. When she couldn't get anyone from the program, she contacted her city council representative, Jennifer Staubach Gates, and got another phone number to call. She spoke to a bus arm program staffer, but that person reinforced that Chandler had already missed the deadline.

Then a few weeks ago, she received a letter signed by a supervisor for a bus arm program call center telling her that her citation was dismissed.

The letter states, "There are no further actions needed regarding the violation and you are clear from all fines and penalties."

She doesn't know why it was dismissed. I tried to find out, too, but could not.

The situation: A driver gets a citation a year after her infraction, not from the agency but from a collection agency. The deadline for appeal has passed. Nobody answers the mail. Then the citation is dropped without explanation.

I asked Dallas County Schools about this confusion, and surprisingly, a written response from board President Larry Duncan was not about his agency but about Chandler.

"Joan Chandler put the lives of our school children in jeopardy when she failed to stop her vehicle when passing a stopped school bus with its stop arm deployed and lights flashing."

Then why was the ticket dismissed?

"The citation should NOT have been dismissed," he writes. "We do not know why the city administrative hearing officer did so, but we

intend to find out.”

Dallas County Schools Assistant Superintendent Susan Falvo says the customer service side of the program is changing. In the past, an outside company, Force Multiplier Solutions of Dallas, handled phone calls from the public about citations.

“We’re taking all that internal,” she says, meaning that government employees, not outside vendors, will be the main point of contact.

Dallas County Schools is now selling the school bus stop arm program to school districts and cities across the state. The agency touts in a news release that its program “will revolutionize school bus transportation.”

Along with the bus arm cameras, the technology being sold includes live interior cameras, a thumbprint scanner for student riders, GPS tracking, a driver panic emergency button and a “Pedophile Finder” rear-facing camera, as the program calls it. (The camera “records suspicious vehicles following or surfing the bus and can be reviewed in case of a kidnapping.”)

As Dallas County Schools spreads its wings, let’s hope the district becomes more transparent about its shortcomings. I got few answers from them. Why did her case fall through the cracks, and what happened that the outside vendor lost its job dealing with the public?

A government bureaucracy with the power to use new technologies to fine people must be willing to look at itself and be open and forthcoming. When it’s not, that troubles me almost as much as a driver who passes a school bus when she shouldn’t.

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Staff writer *Marina Trahan Martinez* contributed to this report.

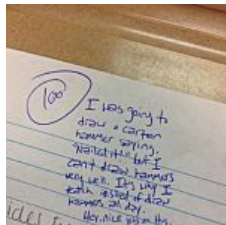
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