

From Farmington Daily Times

## EDITORIAL

# Sobriety checkpoints are an inconvenience

By The Daily Times

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There is nothing worse than waiting at a police roadblock.

You wait and wait and wait, only to eventually be harassed by state police.

Places to go, people to meet, in a hurry — it doesn't matter. You've got to stop.

Many Farmington area residents know what we're talking about.

This past holiday weekend, local motorists were inconvenienced, waiting and waiting, as state police poked and prodded innocent drivers at a series of roadblocks as part of Operation Black and White.

The operation, according to Sgt. Matthew Vigil, was intended to reduce the number of people driving while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Two sobriety checkpoints were set up, one during the day and one at night. State Police reported arresting as many people for DWI at night as they did during the day.

"Surprisingly, you get them both times equally," Vigil said.

According to New Mexico State Police, there were nine DWI arrests in the area, including two individuals who were arrested with four or more DWIs already on their records.

There also was one alcohol-related crash.

Vigil said the roadblocks are justified.

"There are times when you get fugitives wanted for high-felony crimes," he said.

Such crimes, Vigil said, include narcotics arrests — mostly for methamphetamine and cocaine.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. But what about the rest of us, waiting and waiting and waiting, just to get hassled by police?

There is no hassle, Vigil says. Officers are instructed to politely greet drivers and explain they are entering a checkpoint.

Drivers are then given a quick, standardized sobriety test that checks reflexes and coordination. Police then ask each driver for license and registration.

"If the officer feels there is more to the contact, then he asks the driver to pull over into the staging area," said Vigil.

In other words, more hassle.

What are we living in, a police state?

No, we are living in a state where alcohol-related traffic deaths remain at an epidemic level.

We are getting better, though. The number of alcohol-related fatalities in New Mexico dropped from a high of 375 in 1982 to 198 in 2003, a reduction of 47.2 percent.

But we still have a long way to go.

According to a 2004 report compiled by a national physicians' group, End Needless Death on Our Roadways, New Mexico ranks among the 15 deadliest states for alcohol-related fatalities.

Forty-five percent of all traffic fatalities in our state can be attributed to alcohol.

That lists New Mexico as No. 13 deadliest, according to END.

By the way, Rhode Island was first at 55 percent, while Utah had the lowest percentage of alcohol-related traffic fatalities in 2003 at 15 percent.

The national average is 40 percent, according to END.

Drivers traveling a week ago on the Navajo Nation near Gallup on Route 264 between Tse Bonito and Ya-Ta-Hay may have encountered two familiar faces at a sobriety checkpoint, in addition to police.

Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley Jr. and First Lady Vikki Shirley joined Navajo Police officers at the checkpoint.

The first couple lost their daughter to a drunken driver in 2001, and they just wanted to remind motorists to "drive safe (and) drive sober."

Let's hope motorists inconvenienced at the road block take that message to heart next time they wait and wait at a checkpoint.

Did we say there is nothing worse than having to wait at a sobriety checkpoint?

We know better, and so should all New Mexico drivers. There are a lot worse scenarios, such as not having the luxury of being inconvenienced at such a checkpoint because a drunken driver is barreling into your vehicle.

We applaud police in their diligent efforts to reduce drunken drivers from the New Mexico roadways — including our full support of sobriety checkpoints.

We'll take a little inconvenience any day, if that means our family and friends have a better chance of getting home safely during a holiday weekend — or on any day, for that matter.

We don't mind the wait.

We wish, however, we didn't have to wait so long for other New Mexicans to finally get the same message.

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