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News

## Uncollected tickets total \$13M

### State to go after drivers who owe court

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By Norb Franz, Macomb Daily Staff Writer

Drivers with unpaid tickets issued in the city of Warren may soon see smaller paychecks or something missing from their state tax refund.

Motorists who have forgotten — or ignored — fines and late fees, will soon get a final warning to pay up.

While some municipalities, including Detroit, have recently announced amnesty plans offering discounts for scofflaws who haven't paid fines, Warren court officials aren't ready to let anyone off the hook.

The city is preparing an agreement to use the Michigan Department of Treasury as a collection agency.

Those who ignore an upcoming payment notice may see their wages garnished, state tax refunds reduced and maybe an unexpected withdrawal from their bank account.

"Amnesty communicates the message that if you put paying off long enough, you'll get a break eventually," said Robert Curtis, 37th District Court administrator.

The numbers are staggering. Since 2000, approximately \$13 million in fines and late fees remain unpaid to the

Warren division of the district court. That court is the busiest in Macomb County, due in part to Warren's rank as the third most populated community in Michigan with thousands of commuters who pass through, or work in, Warren.

The unpaid money involves a whopping 383,000 paper court files, packed into more than a dozen large filing drawers. More than 330,000 are outstanding traffic tickets, over 32,000 are parking citations, and 21,000 involve criminal misdemeanors.

In the 37th District Court's Center Line division, payments are exceedingly late on more than 40,000 traffic civil infractions, over 900 parking violations and approximately 2,000 judgments in criminal cases. Total arrearage: \$1.52 million.

If fines levied are not paid in 14 days, offenders receive a notice from the court, warning them they could be slapped with a late fee and, in the case of traffic cases, face suspension of their driver license. If no payment is received 56 days from the date of a ticket or court judgment, a 20 percent late fee equal is applied.

Current scofflaws may soon get a notice that if they don't pay up, the matter will be sent to the Michigan Treasury Department for collection.

Using Social Security numbers, federal identification numbers and drivers license information, state officials will try to track down the offenders. Ordinance violators and misdemeanor offenders, such as first-time drunken drivers, with outstanding fines and late fees will not be immediately targeted.

The state will take the money from scofflaws' state income tax refunds, wages or bank accounts. For its effort, the state will receive up to 20 percent of any recouped amounts.

Collectors will pursue people who still reside in Michigan but will attempt to chase down anyone who has left the state, Curtis said. Therefore, he predicts motorists handed tickets in the last two to three years might be easiest to find.

"It's a struggle that courts face all across the state," he said.

The collection effort by the Treasury Department on behalf of district court's began in 1993. A few agreements were dropped because of computer system and software incompatibility, said Terry Stanton, Treasury public information officer.

Currently, agreements are in place with five district courthouses, he said.

Among those is the 43rd District Court, Madison Heights division. After some early glitches when it was launched about 10 years ago, the collection effort has been successful, court officials said.

"It's really a good program," said Kristin Bell, chief deputy court clerk. "We're happy with it."

A collections letter gets violators' attention, she said.

"It's kind of scary. It gets them to pay," Bell added.

Last month, the effort generated \$13,000 in payments to Madison Heights, the vast majority from intercepted tax refunds. Approximately \$5,800 was paid in January, and about \$800 in December.

State treasury officers also conduct collections for the Hazel Park division of the 43rd District Court.

Stanton said the court collections program by the state generated a total of approximately \$500,000 in the last fiscal year.

Ten district courts in Wayne County announced a month-long traffic and parking ticket amnesty program for April, The Detroit News reported last week. Chief Judge Marilyn Atkins of the 36th District Court in Detroit said residents are eligible for a 50 percent discount on costs and penalties. She said the move was because of the economy, with many people writing letters claiming that had lost their job or hours cut.

The participating Wayne courts include those in Grosse Pointe Park, Allen Park, Garden City, Woodhaven, Southgate, Wayne, Redford Township, Westland and Hamtramck.

Warren City Council members unanimously approved the collections agreement with the state.

"This is obviously long overdue," Councilman Scott Stevens said.

Curtis and 37th District Chief Judge John Chmura plan to ask Center Line officials in April for support.

Asked by The Macomb Daily why the program wasn't pursued sooner, Chmura, appointed chief judge in October, replied: "Good question. I don't know."

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