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City's coordinated response to deadly stunt driving events showing promise as 11 cars are impounded, 10 out-of-town violators cited 21-028

February 05, 2021 | 12:42 AM

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A coordinated citywide initiative combining tougher legislation with targeted enforcement is showing early promise to deter deadly stunt driving events in San Francisco, with a Jan. 24 response by the San Francisco Police Department netting 11 impounded vehicles and 10 citations for individual violators — not one of them a San Francisco resident.

Under unanimously enacted legislation authored last fall by Supervisors Ahsha Safaí and Aaron Peskin and now-Board President Shamann Walton, beefed up local laws now provide that vehicles involved in stunt driving violations in San Francisco may be impounded for up to 30 days. In tandem with city leaders' policy innovation, SFPD Chief Bill Scott formed a specialized Stunt Driving Response Unit, or SDRU, to prioritize the city's police response to reported incidents.

At 2:45 a.m. on Sunday, Jan. 24, 2021, San Francisco police deployed SDRU in response to 911 reports of a stunt driving incident taking place near the intersection of Dolores Street and 30th Street. Arriving on scene within minutes, SDRU officers identified more than 100 vehicles gathered for the illegal event, blocking all lanes of traffic on Dolores Street. SDRU officers observed drivers in vehicles performing such stunt driving maneuvers as “doughnuts” and “burning rubber” in the area where traffic was blocked. Police ordered participants to clear the roadway and return to their unattended vehicles. Although most participants and spectators promptly complied, returning to their vehicles and leaving the area, 11 vehicles were left unattended, continuing to block lanes of traffic on Dolores Street between 30th and Day Streets. SDRU officers impounded the vehicles, and issued citations to ten drivers from the cities of Oakland, San Leandro, Castro Valley, Petaluma, Antioch, Santa Rosa, San Mateo and Stockton. All of the violators were between the ages of 18 and 23; none of them was a San Francisco resident.

“We will remain fierce in our work together to stop the dangerous act of sideshows in our neighborhoods,” said Board President Shamann Walton. “We created the harshest legislation we could, without violating state law, along with vigilance and support from SFPD to keep our communities safe. As a parent and President of the Board of Supervisors, I will remain committed to ensuring our children can play safely and that our residents can move freely throughout the City without worrying about the dangers of sideshows.”

“Safety is my number one priority and we will do everything we can to stop this reckless behavior in San Francisco,” Supervisor Ahsha Safaí. “Once my legislation was passed last summer and with coordination with the SFPD we’ve seen a precipitous drop in stunt driving, but we must remain vigilant. These underground shows are becoming increasingly dangerous but I am happy my legislation has helped to save the lives of countless impulsive young adults. The confiscating of 11 cars is in my opinion the saving of 11 lives.”

“Sideshows and illegal stunt driving have become an increasingly dangerous problem in District 9,” said Supervisor Hillary Ronen. “Not only are these activities extremely unsafe for the participants, they’ve been associated with burglaries and shootings that endanger the public. I am encouraged by the formation of the Stunt Driving Response Unit and that this has the full attention of the City. I look forward to working with Chief Scott and Department to keep our streets safe.”

“Sideshows are a danger to participants and passersby,” said Supervisor Rafael Mandelman. “I’m grateful to the SFPD’s Stunt Driving Response Unit for quickly resolving the recent stunt driving incident on Dolores Street in my district before anyone was seriously injured.”

“With tougher consequences and targeted enforcement, San Francisco is sending a clear message to stunt drivers throughout the Bay Area that their dangerous, illegal events won’t be tolerated in our City,” said Supervisor Aaron Peskin. “I’m grateful to my City Hall colleagues for unanimously supporting legislation I proudly co-sponsored, and to Chief Bill Scott for his work to create a Stunt Driving Response Unit.”

“Stunt driving events are a dangerous trend that poses especially grave risks to a city as densely populated as San Francisco,” said Chief Bill Scott. “And the fact that most of these violators are very young, inexperienced drivers makes this trend especially worrisome. Deterring this deadly lawlessness is a high priority for all of us in the San Francisco Police Department, but I am especially thankful to Commander Dan Perea; Captains Jason Cherniss and John Jaimerena; Lieutenants Brian Devlin, Thomas Harvey, Anthony Holder, Luke Martin, Tracy McCray and Andrew Meehan; Sergeants Dan Guzman and Leroy Thomas for spearheading our Stunt Driving Response Unit. Finally, all of us in SFPD are grateful to our Board of Supervisors and Mayor Breed for their leadership in enacting tougher laws that will discourage would-be scofflaws and save lives.”

Illegal stunt driving events — which are often described as “sideshows” in regional news coverage — became increasingly common phenomena throughout the Bay Area last year, in defiance of public safety laws and COVID-19-related public health orders alike. San Francisco’s crowded streets and densely populated neighborhoods have not been spared from this dangerous trend, which claimed the life of one spectator late last year.

In February 2020, four separate lawless stunt driving incidents in San Francisco involving nearly 100 vehicles featured high-speed, reckless stunts performed in multiple neighborhoods. Gunshots were fired during an August 2020 stunt driving episode, in which one of the participating drivers lost control of his vehicle. Although spectators narrowly avoided injury or worse in the August incident, a stunt driving event the following month ended in tragedy. On Sept. 6, 2020, the San Francisco Department of Emergency Management’s 911 system was flooded with more than 100 calls for service from alarmed San Franciscans over a particularly egregious stunt driving onslaught. A 22-year-old Sacramento man was shot to death in that incident.

Although citations have been issued in the Jan. 24, 2021 incident, the San Francisco Police Department’s investigation remains open and ongoing. Anyone with information on that or any other illegal stunt driving event is asked to call the SFPD Tip Line at 1 (415) 575-4444 or Text a Tip to TIP411 and begin the text message with SFPD. You may remain anonymous.

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