

As traffic ticket costs soar, more drivers flock to California courts

Written by Australian Business

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According to state records, between 26 and 30 percent of California drivers receive a traffic citation every year. In other words, nearly a third of drivers are pulled over, ticketed and fined every twelve months.

Many drivers don't think a traffic ticket is that big of a deal. But, a new reports shows that the cost of traffic tickets has been steadily creeping higher in California, mostly to fund special projects, leading many drivers to head to court in order to stage a traffic citation defense.

Increase in fines attributed to earmarks to fund special government projects

According to the Judicial Council of California, the average cost of a traffic ticket has nearly quadrupled over the last 20 years. For some infractions, the rise in cost has been even more precipitous; for instance, exceeding the speed limit by 15 miles per hour now costs drivers almost eight times more than it did in 1993.

Surprisingly, under California law the base fine for most traffic violations has not changed over the past two decades. The primary reason for the steep increases? Add-ons to tickets called "penalty assessments" that are tacked on by lawmakers in Sacramento to pay for special projects.

Today, there are ten types of penalty assessments in California, compared to just one ten years ago; a 2006 government report from the California Research Bureau estimated that the state accumulates more than half a billion dollars in revenue annually from traffic tickets. Money from penalty assessments is earmarked for a wide variety of projects, from courthouse construction to funding research into DNA investigative techniques.

More ticketed drivers learn that going to court with a lawyer can save them hundreds

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Twenty years ago, a California driver may have been able to brush off a traffic ticket as bad luck, pay the fine, and move on. But today, failing to contest a ticket can have painful economic repercussions.

Take a red light camera ticket. In 1993, a driver caught running a red light had to pay \$103. Ten years later, the fine had grown more than threefold, to \$340. In the third quarter of 2013, with cameras on the watch at many California intersections, rolling through a red light means a whopping \$490 ticket, with another \$60 tacked on for traffic school.

The base fines and penalty assessments of a traffic ticket can be a significant cost, but they are just the beginning. Higher insurance rates and the potential driving privilege consequences of points on your license can outweigh even the substantial initial costs of paying a traffic ticket.

By retaining a traffic ticket defense attorney and going to court, many motorists get their fines reduced or even get tickets dismissed completely. Even so, the Judicial Council of California reported that just 7.1 percent of Californians who were issued a traffic citation in 2011 contested their ticket in court.

While seven percent might not seem like many drivers taking advantage of the rights they have to contest their traffic tickets, there is some indication that more people are catching on. In 2003, just 4.5 percent of the drivers issued a ticket that year went to court -- 196,000 individuals. In 2011, 383,000 California drivers contested their tickets in court.

If you've been ticketed, ensure that your wallet isn't used as a backdoor funding source for reckless government spending. Get in touch with a California traffic ticket defense attorney, and do everything you can to get your fine reduced or eliminated.