Parking officers do more than write tickets

By Diane Rietman
Journal Staff Writer

There is more to the job of being a parking-enforcement officer than just putting tickets on cars.

Often, they are the first responders to downtown accidents or medical emergencies. They direct traffic when needed for funerals and other events.

"Often, they are the eyes and ears of the police department and provide information if we're looking for someone," Rapid City Police Lt. Dick Gilbert said.

"It's not the easiest job, but they work in snow, rain and extreme heat." People who aren't happy about getting a ticket harass them. Sometimes, they are threatened.

One parking officer informed a man he couldn't drive away because he had more than five unpaid parking tickets. "The car was about to be booted. To keep him from leaving, she stood behind the car," Gilbert said.

Rapid City Police Officer Joyann Kistler said, "We are public officers and have the authority to say they can't move a car," Kistler said.

If you have five unpaid parking tickets, you're placed on the boot list, updated daily.

A car left with a boot for more than 48 hours is towed. Violations can be expensive. The $5 parking fines increase to $10 after 72 hours. For a booted car, that means $50 in parking fines and another $50 for the boot fee. Add that to the $35 to $50 towing fee.

Parking-enforcement officers work two shifts — 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. to 9:30 a.m. and 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

"People in Rapid City think being pulled over and given a citation for speeding is OK, but when you give them a $5 parking ticket, they have a cow," Kistler said. "When you tell someone from out of town it's a $5 ticket, they don't think it's that bad."

More than half of the city's parking tickets are issued to downtown employees. Kistler said.

"There's probably not enough long-term parking, but that doesn't give the people the right to not abide by the parking ordinances," she said. "The problem is that businesses don't provide employee parking, and workers don't want to walk. They end up doing the two-hour parking shuffle, and they're not always successful at it."

Officers often change their parking schedule so motorists don't get used to their routine. "We'll start at Third or Sixth street, and mark the front tires on one block and the back tires on another," Fleck said. Some business owners and downtown employees watch for the parking staff, and then run out to move their cars.

"There comes a point where you recognize people's moving patterns, and you can figure out where they work," Fleck said. "And if the enforcement staff can figure out the patterns of downtown workers, it is a sure bet the workers can figure out the pattern of the enforcement staff."

"When we've changed the route, we actually have people who say we're late or early or somehow off our schedule," Kistler said. "People who do the two-hour shuffle know they are on a schedule and that we also follow a schedule. No matter where we start marking vehicles, it's still the responsibility of the driver to be back at their car in two hours to move it."

And a car shuffler can't avoid a ticket by simply moving his vehicle a few spaces from the original parking spot. He must move the car at least a block away.

Parking-enforcement officers keep notes on where cars have been ticketed and the time they reach certain blocks. They synchronize their watch with police dispatch so all city law enforcement is consistent and so they don't ticket a car before the two hours are really up.

People have suggested giving visitors from other towns or other states a break. "We can't give preferential treatment," Fleck said. "We're just trying to do our job."