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Inside ExploreLI

TOP STORIES

PAY WITH AMNESTY - OR FACE THE BOOT

Suffolk hopes to collect \$45M from scofflaws

BY CRAIG SCHNEIDER
craig.schneider@newsday.com

Suffolk County will waive late fees on outstanding traffic and parking tickets into February in an effort to collect \$45 million in unpaid fines, officials said Tuesday.

But drivers beware: After the 10-week amnesty that ends Feb. 20, the county will come after the biggest scofflaws by booting and towing their cars, officials said.

This program, the first major amnesty offered by the county, applies to fines for red-light camera, parking and traffic offenses, said Paul Margiotta, executive director of the county's traffic and parking violation agency.

Suffolk has a total of 548,888 unpaid tickets, with red-light camera violations accounting for 437,615 of them, officials said.

Beyond that, people can use this amnesty period to reinstate a driver's license that was suspended due to nonpayment of fines, officials said.

"They have one opportunity to clear everything up . . . before they face this enhanced en-

Getting amnesty

- Those interested in taking advantage of the amnesty program can visit the Suffolk County Traffic and Parking Violation Agency in the H. Lee Dennison Building at 100 Veterans Memorial Hwy. in Hauppauge before Feb. 20.
- Call the agency at 866-637-0008 between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m., Monday through Friday, except during the holidays with any questions.

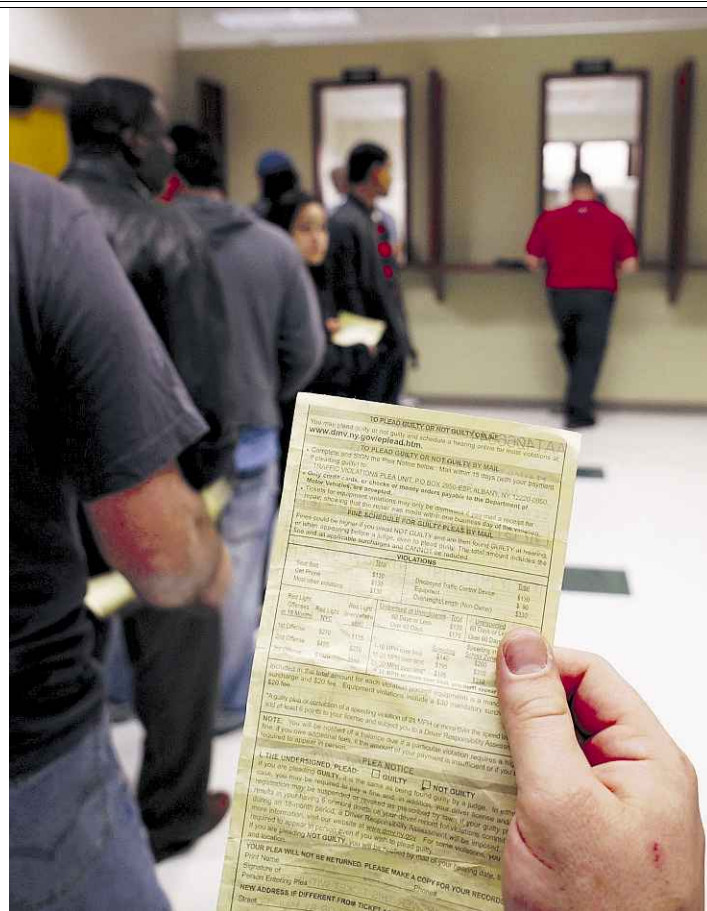
forcement policy," Margiotta said. "They can clear their name, clear their record, and start anew."

One person, he said, owes upward of \$20,000 in red-light camera fines.

The booting and towing will begin March 1, after the county hires a vendor that will use license-plate scanning technology to find vehicles with unpaid tickets, he said.

Legis. William Spencer (D-Centerport) said the policies help people with limited means make amends, while still emphasizing the county's desire to keep the roads safe.

"An amnesty program just makes good sense," Spencer



The amnesty that waives late fees will be in effect through Feb. 20.

said. "There is a way we can administer the program that prioritizes the safety of our roadways and provide an opportunity for drivers to come up to date with any outstanding violations. Administrative costs and late fees can often make it impossible for some to clear their record, and the amnesty will help to meet them halfway."

But Legis. Robert Trotta (R-Fort Salonga) said he viewed the policies as an attempt by the county to squeeze more money out of taxpayers.

"This is nothing more than a mismanaged county trying to balance its books on the backs of taxpayers," Trotta said.

Margiotta took exception to the suggestion that these new programs are aimed primarily at making money. "Public safety is No. 1," he said. "We don't want people thinking they can go out there and drive any way they want and get away with it without any penalties."

Minority Leader Tom Cilmi (R-Bay Shore) said he favors helping people pay their delinquent fines by dropping late fees. "Many times, those additional fees are excessive to begin with," he said.

Parking and traffic tickets can quickly rack up late fees and fines. Parking ticket fines double after 30 days and triple

after 60 days on nonpayment.

Margiotta noted that someone with 10 outstanding parking tickets can owe the county, including penalties, \$7,300. The amount due under the amnesty would be \$2,300, he said.

People would still be responsible to pay the county administrative fees as well as the state surcharges.

The amnesty will not apply to cases where a judge has suspended a person's registration or in which a hearing for suspension is pending, Margiotta said.

Numerous Long Island communities have instituted traffic amnesty programs, and the concept has generated controversy across the country, said Joanna Weiss, co-director of the Fines and Fees Justice Center, a nonprofit dedicated to ensuring that these fines are fair and equitable.

For people with little income, these fines hit especially hard, she said. While she praised the effort to help them pay the costs, she worried that, for many, the original fine itself might be too much to pay. She advocated a sliding scale on fines, geared to the seriousness of the offense as well as a person's ability to pay.

"If they can't afford the base ticket, this isn't going to help," she said.