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Column Author: Dr. Julie Thompson, SCPS Superintendent
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One of the things I have learned during my first several months in Southampton County is that some topics generate more questions and conversation than others. School-zone safety, particularly the speed camera program at Capron Elementary School, is certainly one of them. I have heard questions about when the flashing lights operate, how the camera works, who reviews potential violations, and where the money collected from citations goes. I think it is important that we take the time to explain these processes and share what we are doing to make our school zones safer.

At the heart of all of this is a simple priority: protecting our children. When students are arriving at school in the morning or leaving in the afternoon, we need drivers to slow down, pay attention, and recognize that children are nearby.

Across Southampton County Public Schools, we have 18 flashing school-zone beacons serving our six schools. These lights are programmed to operate around student arrival and dismissal times. Through a scheduling system called BlinkLink, we can remotely program the lights and adjust their schedules when needed. For example, when we have a two-hour delay or an early dismissal, we can modify the schedules so the flashing lights correspond with the revised school day.

The normal operating hours vary by school. At Southampton Middle School and Southampton High School, the lights operate from 7:00–7:45 a.m. and 2:15–3:00 p.m. At our four elementary schools (Capron, Meherrin, Nottoway, and Riverdale), the lights operate from 8:15–9:15 a.m. and 3:15–4:15 p.m. The flashing beacons are the visual notification to drivers that school-zone restrictions are active.

At Capron Elementary, we have an additional safety measure: a photo speed monitoring camera operated by Blue Line Solutions. During active school-zone periods, the posted speed limit is 35 miles per hour. Under Virginia law, a civil penalty may apply when a vehicle is traveling at least 10 miles per hour over the posted speed limit.

It is important to understand that a camera recording does not automatically result in a citation. Blue Line Solutions provides photographic evidence of a potential violation, including the vehicle's license plate and an image showing the flashing school-zone lights. That information is forwarded to the Southampton County Sheriff's Office, where Lieutenant Hank Fuller reviews each potential violation before a citation is issued. His review includes confirming that the

flashing beacon was visible and that school was actually in session at the time. The civil penalty is $100, and payments are handled directly through Blue Line Solutions.

Another question we receive concerns where that money goes. The fine revenue does not go directly to Southampton County Public Schools or into the Sheriff's Office budget. Funds are handled through the County's appropriation process, with funds restricted to designated local traffic-safety purposes. Our school division's role is centered on student safety and ensuring that our school-zone equipment operates as intended. SCPS personnel do not determine whether a driver receives a citation.

While explaining how the system works, I also want to share an important update about the flashing beacons themselves. Unfortunately, we have experienced equipment problems with our current system. Several beacons have stopped working because of circuit board failures, and we believe some of the existing internet-connected modems are also experiencing issues communicating with BlinkLink. This can cause lights not to respond appropriately to their programmed schedules.

Rather than continue making individual repairs to aging equipment, we began exploring a comprehensive replacement. In October, we presented a proposal to the Southampton County Board of Supervisors to replace all 18 flashing beacons across our six schools with a coordinated system of new, solar-powered assemblies. The proposal includes speed-limit signs, removal of the existing equipment, installation, and remote programming services.

The quoted project cost from Blue Line Solutions is $466,616. I am pleased to report that the Board of Supervisors supported moving forward with the proposal and blessed the use of funds generated through the Capron speed-camera program for this divisionwide safety improvement. The necessary appropriation is expected to come before the Board of Supervisors for approval at its November 17 meeting.

This project will give us the opportunity to move toward one coordinated, more dependable system across all six schools. It will also allow us to address the annual BlinkLink scheduling software expense, which currently costs the division $5,605 each year.

I appreciate the partnership of the Southampton County School Board, Southampton County Board of Supervisors, and the Southampton County Sheriff's Office as we work through these issues. I also appreciate Lieutenant Fuller for the important role he plays in reviewing potential violations and helping ensure the process is followed appropriately.

Ultimately, flashing lights and speed cameras are tools. Their purpose is not to create confusion or simply issue citations. Their purpose is to encourage responsible driving and help protect the children who walk into our schools and ride our buses every day.

Whether you are driving through Capron, passing Southampton Middle or High School, or traveling along the road near any of our elementary schools, please slow down and pay attention. A few extra seconds on the road can make an immeasurable difference in someone's life.

As we continue our work of being rooted in excellence and growing together, the safety of our students will always remain at the center of our decisions. Thank you for being a partner in that work. It takes all of us to keep our Southampton County family safe.