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Using GPS, governments and businesses save on fuel The Town of Babylon installs GPS units in its boats to make sure its bay constables do not burn too much fuel while they patrol the Great South Bay.

In Islip, town officials have used the tracking devices to discipline employees for driving 80 mph in a 45-mph zone - not just because speeding is illegal, but also because it burns more gas than observing the limit.

And in Hampton Bays, the owner of a firm that installs heating and cooling systems saves fuel by outfitting his mechanics with GPS-equipped laptops so they can find their way quickly if they get lost on the East End.

Government agencies and private businesses increasingly are using GPS - global positioning systems - to monitor their vehicles' fuel use. With the national average for a gallon of regular gasoline climbing higher than \$4.10, experts expect even more reliance on GPS to audit vehicles.

It's all about gas

The current gas crisis has been a windfall for vehicle tracking companies.

The units, which allow users to track vehicles' locations, speeds and idle times, were originally installed by towns and firms to monitor worker productivity.

But that aspect has faded, now it's all about gas. It's a perfect storm, so to speak, for us, between rising fuel costs, labor costs and insurance fees.

The Town of Brookhaven is considering spending up to \$233,530 a year to monitor up to 780 of its cars and trucks. Islip and Babylon purchased GPS systems in the last few years.

Private companies locally and nationally have been using the technology to manage fleets for years.

Keeping track of drivers

Vehicle tracking companies install a device the size of a pack of cards, typically locating it behind the instrument cluster or behind the dashboard. The device tracks location, direction, speed, engine idling periods and mileage, using satellites. Customers can instantaneously track their vehicles, using the company's software installed on their computers or by visiting a Web site. The vehicles appear as pushpins on a map, moving as their location information is updated.

Islip and Babylon have assigned town employees to work as GPS administrators, who track vehicles and look for driving patterns that waste gas, town officials said. Babylon, which has about 300 GPS units, also installs the systems in boats, said Vanessa Baird-Streeter, a town spokeswoman.

"They patrol the Great South Bay and each day we see them making a rectangular path," she said. "So we said, wouldn't it be better if you stayed in one place in the middle and then responded if you were needed?"

Babylon and Islip officials declined to offer estimates of how much money their towns have saved on fuel by using GPS. Babylon installed its system in early 2006, Islip in May 2007.

Brookhaven officials have said they expect to save \$130,000 in fuel per year if the system is approved.

"If you cut down on the speeding and you cut down on the idling, you are saving a lot of money on gas. If you are under 55 [mph], you are saving money on gas," said Thalia Bouklas, Brookhaven's director of management and research.

Some towns have run afoul of local unions that oppose the GPS units. In Babylon, workers complained when two employees were caught via GPS and disciplined for goofing off on town time. In Brookhaven, union leaders have said GPS tracking will lead to micromanagement.

Saving time, money

The units also are a growing trend in the private sector, where GPS units give dispatchers a way to help drivers get out of traffic, said David Sher, lead dispatcher for three affiliated companies based in New Hyde Park - Day & Nite Refrigeration, Day & Nite Air Conditioning and All Service Kitchen Equipment Repair.

Dominick Russo - whose companies, Weber & Grahn Conditioning and W&G Service, install and service heating and air-conditioning systems for high-end builders in the Hamptons - said tracking is critical for his businesses.

"In the past we'd have to get on the Nextel and say, 'Is anyone in the East Hampton area?'" Russo said. "A lot of times there are dead spots and as long as you can see the sky, GPS works."

By Patrick Whittle and Keiko Morris, Newsday.com July 15, 2008

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