



CITY OF ATLANTA

City Auditor's Office
Leslie Ward, City Auditor
404.330.6452

December 2008

Performance Audit:

Traffic Tickets

What We Found

Municipal Court management offered several explanations for why reported fiscal year 2007 ticket revenue was significantly less than budgeted, including that police were writing fewer tickets, failing to turn in all tickets written, and making errors that caused tickets to be rejected. However, most of the apparent decrease is explained by changes in how the city accounts for and records revenue. The city's fiscal year 2005 ticket revenue was inflated by a one-time collection of about \$3 million in past due accounts, while fiscal year 2007 ticket revenue was understated by at least \$3.1 million, mostly because of a backlog in fine payments requiring manual processing. Taking these factors into consideration, the change in revenue from fiscal year 2005 to 2007 was essentially flat.

Changes in ticket filings had little effect on fiscal year 2007 revenue. Ticket filings declined by approximately 8 percent between fiscal years 2005 and 2007, but most of the decrease was with tickets filed by non-city agencies. Changes in the types of tickets issued could reduce fine revenue going forward; however, in fiscal year 2008 the city issued fewer traffic tickets and more parking and red light tickets, which have lower fine amounts and lower collection rates. Further, parking fine revenues are likely to decrease in the current fiscal year due to staff cuts in Public Works.

Police are not filing traffic tickets with the court quickly enough to ensure court staff enters the tickets before fines are due. Police are filing only 45% of traffic tickets within their self-imposed deadline of 1 business day after writing the ticket. Consequently, between 2% and 5% of traffic tickets are not entered into the court system by the presumed deadline, meaning that defendants cannot pay fines online or by phone before their court dates, court dates must be reset, or, in some cases, the Solicitor's Office may reject the ticket.

Nearly one-quarter of parking tickets are entered into the system after the fine is due. As a result, violators may have difficulty paying the fines on time and collections may suffer. Because court staff enters inaccurate filing dates in the system, we could not assess whether parking tickets were filed within one business day. Our limited testing of Public Works' process for turning in parking tickets suggests the court is responsible for most of the delay in processing parking tickets.

Why We Did This Audit

The Atlanta City Council's Public Safety and Legal Administration Committee requested our office audit traffic and parking tickets processed by Municipal Court.

City officials questioned whether all of the Atlanta Police Department's tickets were being filed with the Municipal Court and whether the data was being entered into the system promptly. Traffic ticket revenue, which makes up a portion of the general fund revenue, appeared significantly lower than projected for fiscal year 2007.

What We Recommended

To enforce its traffic and parking ordinance and appropriately account for revenue due to the city, staff should:

- Solicit assistance from the Law Department to define procedures necessary to collect on unpaid red light fines.
- Consistently post court revenue to appropriate accounts in accordance with city policy.
- Assess fluctuations and forecast expected revenues to budget anticipations more accurately.
- Adhere to departmental policies and file tickets with the court within one day.
- Date stamp each parking ticket to provide a record of the date issuing agencies filed each ticket.

For more information regarding this report, please contact Stephanie Jackson at 404.330.6678 or sjackson@atlantaga.gov.