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Police seek bright ideas to fight headlight thieves

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BY BARRY CARTER
Star-Ledger Staff

Every time Cleo Thomas sees the bright blue-white headlights in late-model cars, he can't help but wonder if they belong to his Nissan Maxima.

Since November, Thomas has been hit three times, shelling out \$500 -- the amount of his deductible -- for each claim of \$800 or so to replace the popular xenon headlights that car thieves swipe from Nissan Maximas, Acuras, Audis and other luxury vehicles.

Thomas tried tying them to the frame of the car the second time and had a sensor installed the third time to trigger his pager and alert him.

"When my girlfriend and I left the club, I noticed the grille on the ground and the lights were gone," said Thomas, who lives in Newark.

Several law enforcement agencies and Nissan North America Inc. gathered yesterday at the Newark Police Department's Communication Center to talk about what they can do to help people and how they can get a handle on the thefts, a problem primarily seen in New York and New Jersey.

John Schilling, Nissan's manager of corporate communication, said the company could not have foreseen the problem when the Maxima was being designed in the mid-1990s. When the car first came out, the thefts didn't happen, said Schilling, noting that in the past year, 98 percent of the thefts occurred in the two states.

"It's going to take some time to come up with a surefire solution," Schilling said.

Until then, Schilling told police officials that Nissan has offered consumers a theft-deterrent kit for \$67 to make it more difficult for car thieves to steal the

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lights from 2002-03 models. In a video presentation, the lights were taken in a minute, but Newark officials said they can be popped out in 30 seconds with a screwdriver.

Schilling said the 2004 Maxima should be a relief to consumers. They will be given an option to have xenon or standard halogen lights installed.

Nissan has loaned a Maxima to the New York police for sting operations specifically against headlight thieves, he said, and is considering technology that would put identification numbers on the car.

The technology, provided by DataDot USA of Issaquah, Wash., sprays dots the size of a grain of sand with VIN numbers onto major car components. It has been used in Australia by BMW, Porsche, Ford, Subaru and Mitsubishi.

Newark Police Chief Anthony Ambrose called the police group together yesterday after a meeting with the Essex County Police Chiefs Association this year. At that meeting, Ambrose, who is the association's president, said chiefs in the county began to talk about the problem they were having with the headlight thefts.

In Newark, 143 lights have been stolen from cars since January, Ambrose said. "We believe a lot of people are taking them and using them in older-model cars."

In Maplewood, Police Chief Robert Cimino reported 27. Roseland Police Chief Richard McDonough said there have been 20 thefts in the past year, primarily from office complexes along Eisenhower Parkway.

"They (thieves) act like they're working on the car," McDonough said.

Montclair Police Chief Dave Harman said more than 30 thefts have been reported since the beginning of the year. He said yesterday's meeting would help police departments across the county tackle the issue together, instead of individually.

The problem, according to some law enforcement officials, is that the lights can be stolen quickly and sold fast on the street, bringing anywhere from \$100 to \$300.

"It's a nightmare," said Sgt. William Weller of the New York Police Department. He said the DataDot technology would help in the prosecution of car thieves.

West Orange resident Glen Hendricks said the technology is fine, but he described the thefts as a nuisance crime that makes it hard for police to catch the thieves. It also is making it difficult for Hendricks to get another insurance carrier to pick up when his current policy expires this month.

After paying \$2,000 in deductibles and other costs, Hendricks gave up on replacing the xenon lights when they were stolen four times in front of his home on South Valley Street. He now has standard halogen lamps.

"So far, it's working," he said.

Thomas, however, still has the popular lights. He's keeping his fingers crossed. Two months have passed and the lights have not been swiped.

"I'm still nervous every time I park my car," he said.

Barry Carter covers Newark. He can be reached at bcarter@starledger.com or (973) 392-1827.

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