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Revisiting red light cameras

Sarasota County will again consider measure it set aside 2 months ago

By [Doug Sword](#)

Published: Saturday, August 23, 2008 at 1:00 a.m.

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SARASOTA COUNTY - The county is considering installing red light cameras at 10 of its most dangerous intersections, estimating that 18,000 drivers will be caught in the first year.



COURTESY PHOTO

An image from a 2006 pilot program that showed 900 vehicles running red lights in Sarasota County.

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A growing number of Florida cities and counties, including Manatee, are ignoring the lack of a state law allowing red light cameras, instead passing their own laws. The issue is set to be among the first that Sarasota County commissioners take up on Tuesday when they return from their summer break.

Sarasota was ready to pass the law two months ago, but backed off over concerns about enforcement, public skepticism and whether the cameras would generate enough money in \$125 fines to pay for themselves.

So Efrain Duque, acting manager of traffic engineering and operations, spent part of his summer putting together a business plan in which he estimates that revenues will exceed costs. Among those costs: setting up an appeals process for people to contest their tickets, and paying for the time of sheriff's deputies who must review the photo on a ticket before it is sent out.

Based on a 2006 pilot program in which the county placed cameras at two intersections but did not issue fines, Duque estimates that cameras at the 10 intersections will bring in about \$2 million a year. That is enough, he said, to draw bids from private vendors who would operate the cameras.

The cameras come with their own conundrum: The more successful they are at getting people to stop for red lights, the less economically feasible they are.

Earlier this year, Dallas reportedly scrapped one-fourth of its red light cameras because they were not generating enough revenue to justify their costs. Red light running was down by half at some of the city's intersections.

In Sarasota, too, the mere presence of the red light cameras would likely stop some people from running them, Duque said.

Part of the reason Sarasota backed off passing the ordinance in June was the lack of a state law. Anyone who does not pay a fine for violating a state law can have his driver's license revoked. The county's red-light camera ordinance could not use that provision.

That left the county with the threat that it would revoke county services to those who did not pay. But the prospect of having a library card revoked would probably not be compelling to many people.

The new ordinance, though, gives the county the ability to place a lien against the property of the owner of the car caught by a red light camera, Duque said.

David Haenel, a Sarasota attorney specializing in traffic law, is eager to see the proposed law. He is not sure a lien would work against drivers who do not live in Sarasota County.

"You have to be a county resident for that to have an effect on you," he said. "Is Sarasota County going to go file a

lien in Manatee County?"

While county officials say they consider the cameras to be a public safety measure, it is the concern over revenue that has some residents questioning the county's motives.

"Deterrence with cameras may not be a bad idea, but the concern I have is vendors needing to recoup their investment," said Mark Sieve, a 48-year-old waiter from Sarasota. "That kind of smells like a rat."

If revenues fall short, Sieve worries that the county would tinker with the timing of its signals, effectively entrapping drivers.

Distrust by the public was a concern to Public Works Director Jim Harriott. He said he wanted more study done on whether vendors would be willing to accept a flat fee for operating the cameras. Fixed compensation for the vendor would undermine the argument that the county was installing the cameras simply to make money, Harriott said.

At a minimum, the county goes by state standards when it comes to setting the timing of its traffic lights, Duque said.

That means lights along a street with a speed limit of 30 mph have at least a 3.5 second yellow light. For 50 mph, the yellow light is at least 4.7 seconds.

The same state standard is used to set all-red intervals, the amount of time that lights in all directions are red between signal changes.

For roads with speed limits of 50 mph or less, the all-red interval is at least one second.

If the ordinance is passed, Sarasota County will join Manatee, Collier and Hillsborough counties, and cities including Bradenton, Gulf Breeze and Apopka, in using red light cameras.

The next step would be to ask for bids from companies that operate the cameras.

Safety claims disputed

The argument that curtailing red light running can save lives is backed up by the estimated 100,000 crashes and 1,000 deaths a year connected to drivers running through lights.

Supporters of red light cameras point to studies that show the presence of these cameras cut the number of right-angle, or T-bone, collisions. Opponents, though, point to the same studies, which often find that rear-end collisions rise because drivers tend to slam on their brakes when they think they are on camera.

Actually, both findings are flawed, according to a 2005 report by the Federal Highway Administration. Some studies tend to exaggerate the reduction in accidents at intersections with red light cameras and others completely ignore the deterrence effect the cameras have because drivers in cities that use the cameras are more cautious about running lights.

Overall, the FHWA found red light cameras provided a modest benefit in curtailing the costs of accidents.

In a seven-city study, the federal agency also found a small decline in injuries, partly because they are more severe in T-bone crashes than in rear-end collisions.

The agency recommended that municipalities looking to use the cameras place them at intersections that have the highest rates of right-angle crashes.


That is the plan, says Duque, pointing to a list of dangerous intersections -- including Lockwood Ridge Road at 17th Street and Jacaranda Boulevard at Venice Avenue -- that will be used to choose the locations for the 10 camera sites.

Commissioner Paul Mercier says red light running is rampant in Sarasota County, and the suggestion angers him that money rather than public safety is behind his push for the cameras.

"I just want to stop the red light runners," Mercier said during the last debate on the cameras. "We have to talk money, but that's not the real issue."

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1. [captainjimmy](#) says...
August 23, 2008 6:11:07 am

RE: <http://www.heraldtribune.com/article/20080823/ARTICLE/808230359>

After reading this article one thought kept popping into my mind, "BIG BROTHER" from the movie "1984". Already there is way too much information floating around about the average citizen and now we are going to

have surveillance cameras watching our movement on the roads as well? It is NOT about red light running, as we are being sold this bill of goods, it is about keeping tabs on who and where we are.

Come on people, wake up, anyone recall reading the articles about the national ID, or even about microchips being implanted into people, or the new currency that has RFID embedded into it? This will give BIG BROTHER another way to keep tabs on where we are and we are being told it is for our own good.

First of all, they wish to place these cameras at locations to supposedly control red light running, then they want to privatize the operation, and an end result place a lien against your home. Does this really sound like a government that has your interest at heart? Not in my world it doesn't, it smells of fascism.

Just last night I was watching a documentary about Florida developing over the last 50 years and to tell you the truth, this last ten years have been the worst yet! In the 50's many cities in this state were bending over backward to get people to move here to live and taxes were lower than most anywhere else, insurance rates were lower and local government was out to gain the trust of people. Look at it now, we have the highest insurance cost, higher than normal tax rates, lower paying jobs and more governmental intrusion into our lives. What has happened to our fair land? Once sentence covers it, "GOVERNMENT CORRUPTION".

We need less manipulation by government and more trust of the officials and this will not be gained by placing more power in their hands. Time to take back the control that we have already handed them.

Anyone that has never seen or heard of the movie "1984" I would suggest that you rent it, buy it, borrow it and watch it with an open mind then examine the things being said in this article for similarity.

Capt. Jimmy
Englewood

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2. [ram2006](#) says...
August 23, 2008 7:39:02 am

Capt. its all about the money.

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3. [bertman100](#) says...
August 23, 2008 7:48:50 am

of course its all about money..i think this will backfire on them..they ought to watch on camera for the a***** who pull all the way into the intersection on a green left turn and then after the light turns red goes through it..thats a much bigger violation than missing a yellow by a split second by accident

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4. [jb71187](#) says...
August 23, 2008 9:04:22 am

This is hardly new technology.

They had Red Light cameras/video in NY 25 years ago.

But this what I don't understand, If a cop gets you for going through a red light, the DRIVER gets the ticket, If a camera gets a CAR for going through the light who do you make out the ticket to. A white Honda? or do you just send it to the registered owner, even if he or she wasn't driving? Just doesn't seem right.

You could tie up traffic court for years fighting one of these tickets...

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5. [parkec](#) says...
August 23, 2008 9:11:16 am

It's about safety not about money. daaaa.

That why the county has well publicized anti red light programs, just like it does for Drunken Driving, and Seat Belts (Click it or ticket) Thatâ??s why the County plans to use the ticket money for Red Light programs, and thatâ??s why the county wants to ticket the driver not just the car.

OPPPS!!!! The county isn't doing anything but taking the money, cause it's a safety issue?

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6. [dsfraser1956](#) says...
August 23, 2008 1:07:49 pm

Bertman,

Entering an intersection under a green light with the intent to turn left, then completing the turn when vehicle traffic allows, no matter the color of the light, does not violate the law... it facilitates the flow of traffic.

Capt. Jimmy, I read 1984 in the 60s. I get your drift. When you head to your precinct to vote Tuesday, please give it some thought on who best represents your values.

Dave Fraser

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7. [kenagain](#) says...
August 23, 2008 1:30:44 pm

"Part of the reason Sarasota backed off passing the ordinance in June was the lack of a state law. Anyone who does not pay a fine for violating a state law can have his driver's license revoked. The county's red-light camera ordinance could not use that provision.

That left the county with the threat that it would revoke county services to those who did not pay. But the prospect of having a library card revoked would probably not be compelling to many people." (*Revisiting red light cameras*)

BIG BROTHER better not try to mess with my library card!

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8. [1169219](#) says...
August 23, 2008 11:11:58 pm

Who needs red light cameras?

You can make intersections safe - w/o cameras or increasing rear-enders. Repeat: Without increasing rear-enders!

A. Increasing yellows by 0.5 sec. yields a 69% drop in violations (fn.2). And it's cheap to do all over town - reducing running everywhere, not just at "camera" intersections. Also see (fn.1).

Longer yellows reduce severe accidents. A 2004 study (fn. 3) by the Texas Trans. Inst. found"...an increase in the yellow duration of 1.0 sec. is associated with a [crash freq.] of about 0.6, which corresponds to a 40% reduction in crashes." (fn.3)

(Whenever someone suggests lengthening the yellows, someone else will say, "Drivers will just get used to the longer yellows, and run those, too!" Actually, the running stays down. It does not "rebound." In Mesa, Arizona, they increased the yellows by 1 second in late 2000, and running dropped to 1/3 of what it had been, and stayed down. See the table: (fn.5))

B. Improve street markings. 2005 research (fn. 4) by Florida's Dept. of Transportation found that improving markings near intersections reduced red light running by up to 74 percent without increasing the likelihood of rear end collisions. Repeat: ...without increasing rear end collisions.BH

FN1. <http://thenewspaper.com/news/04/430.asp> (Roundup)

FN2. http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-06242004-230619/unrestricted/Thesis_3.pdf Fig. 4.1 on p. 67

FN3. <http://thenewspaper.com/rlc/docs/04-alternatives.pdf> Fig. 2-8 on p. 2-20

FN4. <http://thenewspaper.com/rlc/docs/05-simulator.pdf> at p. 69

FN5. <http://www.highwayrobbery.net/redlightcamsdocsMesaMain.html>

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9. [mckayd94](#) says...
August 24, 2008 11:02:22 am

haha yeah. Because your so important the government cares where you are all the time. Keep watching tv.

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10. [blogologistsrq](#) says...
August 24, 2008 7:47:07 pm

The Florida legislature, in it's great wisdom, has shot down this legislation because of the privacy issue. However, they miss the point. If you are driving in a car in public...there is NO expectation of privacy. People see into the windows of vehicles...there is no privacy. If you are in a car with someone that you are not supposed to be with....then it's your problem. Also, the ticket is written and sent to the owner of the vehicle. It does not matter who is driving the car. The car went through the red light and it is the responsibility of the registered owner to know who's driving his car and that HE/SHE (the owner)is responsible for what happens.

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