Metro Council members unsure about renewal of red light camera program

BY REBEKAH ALLEN
rallen@theadvocate.com

The Metro Council is set to decide Wednesday whether to kill or renew Baton Rouge's red light camera program, which has been panned by detractors as unevenly enforced but is credited by supporters with reducing dangerous crashes.

The photo enforcement program began in 2008 and has generated almost 150,000 red light tickets.

There are 25 red light cameras at 17 intersections.

Mayor-President Kip Holden said Monday that he hopes the Metro Council will support the program because it's improving traffic safety.

"Frankly, it's reducing the number of crashes we're seeing at major intersections," Holden said.

Near his home, Holden said, Blount Road and Scenic Highway has long been a dangerous and busy intersection that has benefitted in recent years from the cameras.

"You had a lot of big trucks and cars trying to accelerate through the light to jump on the interstate, and a lot of that has stopped," he said. "We're seeing greater safety and crashes being reduced."

Some Metro Council members say they're skeptical the cameras are improving driver safety and are concerned the city-parish has failed to properly enforce red light ticket payments.

"I do not think from what I have been provided that there is any reliable safety data," Mayor Pro Tem Chandler Loupe said. "And the failure to collect such a large portion of the citations has me concerned that the system is not being implemented as originally proposed."

Last month, it was reported that the city-parish has yet to penalize a single red light camera offender for delinquent payments.

About 40 percent, or 59,000 tickets, have not been paid.

The city-parish can enforce the civil infractions by reporting the debt to collection agencies or credit reporting agencies, suing in small claims court or immobilizing vehicles with a boot; officials have not done so. The penalty for running a red light is a $117 fine, with a late charge of $35. The city-parish collects 65 percent, or 55 percent if a late notice must be filed.

The remaining money goes to American Traffic Solutions, the Arizona camera vendor overseeing the program.

That means drivers owe between $6.9 million and $9 million in unpaid fines, more than
half of which would go to the city-parish.

Councilwoman C. Denise Marcelle said she supports the red light cameras but also wants to step up enforcement to collect the money owed to the city-parish.

"Overall the studies show it causes people to slow down," she said. "But I think we need to figure out a way to collect the revenue from it."

She said she would like to see the city-parish use a vehicle boot, which could be used to improve enforcement for other fines, such as for parking violations.

Councilman Buddy Amoroso said he'd rather have police officers stationed at targeted intersections to prevent red light runners.

"I just think having cameras and computers do our police work is not as effective as having boots on the ground," he said.

Amoroso said cameras only detect a red light violation while a police officer can respond quickly to a crash at the light and witness other violations including driving under the influence.

Amoroso also said he has concerns the city-parish has failed to collect the millions of dollars it's owed.

Enforcement will be reevaluated if the contract is extended, according to John Price, an assistant administrative officer to Holden.

He added that every unpaid ticket is still on file and the city-parish has the option to pursue the fines.

A report by the Department of Public Works that looked at crashes and injuries at intersections before and after the cameras were installed said that overall, the program has reduced crashes.

According to the report, right-angle crashes have decreased 40 percent at intersections where cameras were installed in 2008, and 52 percent at intersections where cameras were installed in 2009.

When broken down into individual intersections, the report deemed the majority of decreases to crashes and injuries was "not statistically significant" because the decreases were negligible or inconsistent.

"Due to the relatively small sample sizes and sometimes large amounts of variation, it is still unclear in many cases whether the program has been successful on an individual intersection basis," the report said.

Councilman Joel Boe said he's on the fence about the cameras. While the report does indicate that crashes are trending downward, he said he has a problem with laws being enforced by a third-party administrator.

"If I get pulled over, I know what I did and I have an opportunity to discuss it within reason with that officer," Boe said.

"But here you are getting your citation three or four weeks after the fact."

Councilman Ryan Heck, who has been a vocal opponent of the red light cameras, said he could only support the program if the city-parish demonstrated a "quantifiable public safety benefit."

He said he has his doubts about the city-parish's report. "I'd need to see a third-party analysis, not something from the Mayor's Office and definitely not something from the camera providers," he said.

The contract with ATS runs through Dec. 31. The Metro Council is expected to vote on the issue at its meeting at 4 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 9 at City Hall.