Safety measure or money-maker? Wreck data still inconclusive

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Red-light cameras, city-parish officials insist, were not installed to generate revenue — they were put up to save lives by reducing crashes.

While preliminary crash data for the first two years is inconclusive, one thing is certain: The cameras are generating far more money than projected.

Less than three years after the city-parish installed cameras, drivers have spent $7.3 million on tickets from red-light violations caught on video, city-parish figures show.

That’s about $2.7 million more in revenue than projected in the city-parish’s budgets.

Of that money, $4.9 million stayed in the city-parish coffers, with the rest sent back to camera vendor American Traffic Solutions of Arizona.

The revenue comes from 98,757 tickets issued since the cameras first started being deployed in February 2008, according to the latest reports from the company.

But 40 percent of drivers who received citations still haven’t paid up. That means, at $117 per ticket and with a $35 late fee, drivers still owe as much as $5.6 million.

“They’re nothing but cash machines for local governments,” said state Rep. Jeff Arnold, D-New Orleans, who attempted to ban red-light cameras during the past legislative session. “It’s unconscionable that they would do this.”

Arnold said he plans to introduce legislation this year to force cities that want red-light and speed cameras to put it to a vote of the people.

The first year the cameras were installed, 22,794 tickets were issued. The number climbed to 34,853 tickets the second year and 41,110 in 2010, as cameras continued to be added, American Traffic Solutions reported.

That compares with only 5,336 red-light tickets written in 2007 by police officers, before cameras were installed, according to City Court Administrator Lon Norris.

Police issued 8,464 tickets in 2006.

Sarah Paul Edel, a traffic engineer for the Department of Public Works, said her office expected tickets from the cameras to increase for a time, then decrease before leveling off.

The five cameras in place for the longest-period of time seem to reflect that trend, based on data in a report Edel submitted to the state Department of Transportation and Development for 2008 and 2009.

Many of the other cameras were installed later in the...
CRASHES

"So are the cameras making traffic safer?"

It's not definitively say, Partenheimer said. "The cameras have been in 13 intersections that have had cameras. The cameras in the ones that are functioning are the cameras that have the cameras."

"Accidents at these intersections in the three years before the cameras are averaged 1,356, while accidents at the full year of camera use, there were 1,324, which are at these interactions."

However, injuries increased from 48 to 104. Partenheimer said the numbers of crashes and injuries fluctuate, and he cannot tell if the injuries increased. The cameras were installed in 2009, and there were 1,324, which are at these interactions.

Partenheimer said he's looking for noticeable reductions. Partenheimer said that the reduction in fatalities is a side effect, and he also study the location individually to look at each camera's effect.

The most dangerous type of accident is a side impact. Partenheimer, said Charlie Terrio, a member of the American Traffic Solutions.

"There are types of crashes that cameras can beat at preventing. The cameras have a high rate of speed and broadside occurring vehicles with the potential to infringe tremendous monetary damage and to result in injuries or fatalities," Terrio said.

"Those are the types of accidents that intersection-safety cameras seem to eliminate, and studies have shown that they do just that," he said.

Partenheimer said other cities have reported that rear-end crashes increase for a while after cameras are installed. He added that rear-end crashes might be prevented when people get accustomed to the cameras.

"People get paranoid about them and slam on their brakes," he said. "Small people who are following too closely are run into the back of the truck."

"Rear-end crashes kill fewer people than other types of accidents, he noted."

In 2006, there were 722 recorded crashes at the 13 intersections with cameras, up 58 from the average of the prior two years. But by 2009, that number dropped back down to the average seen earlier in the data in Edel's report.

PUBLIC SAFETY BENEFITS

Under its contract with American Traffic Solutions, the city parish receives 65 percent of the fine collections from the first notice to violators and 55 percent if a second notice must be sent. Revenue from the tickets must be used for public safety, according to the city-parish ordinance.

Public safety makes up more than half of the general fund, said John Carpenter, acting chief administrative officer for Mayor-President Kirk Holding.

Ticket revenue has been used to increase Police Department salaries and benefits and to boost manpower, Carpenter said.

He said the 2010 budget police budget was $18.3 million. Before the cameras were installed in 2007, it was $6.7 million. Some of the money was used to buy speed bumps and to add more traffic engineering technicians who work on signals, Carpenter said.

Carson, who spoke on behalf of the police department, said the cameras freed traffic officers who previously had to monitor traffic lights for officers. Cameras also provide evidence if officers from having to chase down red light offenders, which can be dangerous, Carpenter said.

The Police Department re-directed all questions with this article to Carpenter.

"We need to keep the public interested and increasing revenue," Carpenter said.

"The cameras are up to ticket rolling red-light violations. Some of these tickets are not being paid," he said. "The city-parish cameras are set up to put up any more cameras."

Right on red

Holstein Schneider, an LSU associate dean for research and economic development who helps the state compile traffic data, conducted a 2006 study in Lafayette a year after that city installed six red light cameras.

Schneider said he thinks cameras can reduce side-impact crashes if an intersection is selected based on evidence that it has a high-crash spot. That's exactly how the 20 cameras in Lafayette intersections were picked, Partenheimer said.

But Schneider said cameras also can be operated in ways that could be perceived as money-makers for a city.

One example cited it is setting the cameras to target traffic drivers who make rolling right on red lights. Carpenter said police issue a citation based on the video if an officer witnessed the violation and the backseat would have cited the driver.

Savings Lives

Highly dédicated to be interviewed for this story, the defender of the cameras before and after legislation last year, said lawyers were considering whether to order them. "In summary, the red light program saves lives," Holdin said.

Data compiled by LSU's Highway Safety Research Group shows running red lights has ranked low among the causes of traffic fatalities."