

Red-light cameras being stopped



Red light cameras at Vanowen Street and Balboa Boulevard, Friday, April 22, 2011.
(Michael Owen Baker/Staff Photographer)

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Red-light cameras — controversial traffic enforcement devices that can ding an unsuspecting motorist for \$500 a pop for minor infractions like illegally turning right on red — are slowly fading to black.

For the first time since they were introduced in the 1980s, statistics show a large drop in the number of cities and counties using the photo enforcement systems. Yet, many smaller cities are hanging on to the programs in order to keep the revenues they raise.

According to a not-yet-released report on red-light cameras from the Reason Foundation, the number of communities with red-light cameras in the United States has dropped from about 700 in 2011 to 500 at the end of 2013.

In California, 60 cities and counties have ended red-light camera programs, more than the number presently using the cameras — about 51, said Jay Beeber, a researcher writing the report on red-light cameras for the libertarian-leaning think tank, who is also executive director of the group Safer Streets LA and a member of a subcommittee of the [California Traffic Control Devices Committee](#), authorized by Caltrans to study reforms.

“The overall number of red-light camera locations have dropped,” Beeber said. “The trend has begun to reverse itself.”

Declining revenues, a nonsupportive court system and increases in the number of accidents instead of decreases, are the major reasons why cities have pulled the plug on red-light cameras in the past two years.

Some city council members and city traffic engineers interviewed said photo enforcement is causing more rear-end accidents because people are scared when they see a yellow light at a camera-controlled intersection and slam on their brakes.

At one intersection in Los Angeles, Beeber said statistics showed an 80 percent increase in rear-end collisions. Murrieta reported a 325 percent increase in rear-end collisions after red-light cameras were installed, according to the state Legislature. Both cities have scrapped their programs. In Murrieta, voters approved a ballot measure that called for removing the cameras by 87 percent. The courts later overturned the ballot measure.

Twenty-seven out of 30 ballot measures on red-light cameras have resulted in programs being overturned, Beeber said.

In Walnut, rear-end collisions increased by 80 percent at the photo-enforced intersection of Grand Avenue and Amar/ Temple Avenue, according to Beeber's report.

The city staff said the increase in rear-end collisions were a worthwhile trade-off for fewer broadside collisions. But Beeber said there was only one fewer broadside accident, a statistically insignificant number.

A Virginia Department of Transportation study concluded rear-end collisions increased between 31 percent and 54 percent at intersections with red-light cameras, including an 18 percent increase in injury-related accidents.

El Cajon, a city in Northern San Diego County with about double the population of Walnut, junked its red-light cameras in September after suspending the program in February, not long after San Diego did the same.

A before and after study in El Cajon found about the same number of accidents.

"There wasn't much difference," said Majed Al-Ghafry, assistant city manager. In the past year with the cameras, there were 28 to 30 accidents; with no red-light camera, there were 34 accidents. "It was not significant and many were other types of accidents," Al-Ghafry said.

Likewise, after San Bernardino ended its program in December 2012, there has not been a significant increase in accidents, said Lieutenant Rich Lawhead.

Los Angeles and Pasadena removed all their red-light cameras within the past two years. Both cited numerous reasons, but one that they had in common was declining support from the Los Angeles County Superior Court.

The court does not report the violations to the state DMV. It is not attached to a person's driving record and does not pop up when a driver is renewing a license or car registration, said court and city officials.

Registered drivers would receive the violations in the mail. But the courts said that was not proof the driver violated the law, only the car. That led to the nonreporting of the red-light camera violations by the courts.

Often, judges would reduce the fines or dismiss them, if the picture of the driver on the video was blurry. Since the fines are split by the state, the county and the city, residuals dropped below the cost of the program, said Norman Baculinao, traffic engineer manager with the city of Pasadena.

“Literally, the voluntary payment became the norm,” he said. “The judge exercised a lot of discretion. Sometimes the judge would give them community service and then no revenue would go to the city.”

Former Los Angeles City Councilman Dennis Zine, who voted with the majority to remove all its cameras at 32 intersections on July 31, 2011, said the program became too costly to operate. The city continued collecting fines until April 1, 2012.

Zine at the time called the program “completely wrong” and characterized it as one that was more about revenue than public safety.

In a recent phone interview, he said the city ended the program because payments to a vendor and time spent by LAPD officers reviewing videotape from the cameras outweighed the benefits. “It was costing us much more than the city was receiving from the fines,” he said.

After further analysis, Los Angeles concluded most of the fines were for people who stopped at the red light but made a right turn where a sign prohibited the normally allowed move. He said right turns on red, or rolling right turns, were not causing traffic collisions.

“The fine of \$500 didn’t seem just and fair to the motoring public,” he said. “It was oppressive.”

Pasadena had red-light cameras at: Lake Avenue and Union Street, Marengo Avenue and Union and Foothill Boulevard and San Gabriel Boulevard. Some were installed in 2003, others in 2005. All were removed in July 2012.

Accidents dropped during the first year but city engineers saw a huge fall-off in violations in the years following. Drivers had become aware of the cameras and drove more carefully, Baculinao said. Now, the city has a blue LED light that tells a live police officer when the light turns red. If he sees a car entering the intersection when the blue light is shining, he can manually cite the driver, said Mark Yamarone, transportation administrator.

The city of Pasadena also increased the yellow light times. “We made it yellow longer than required,” Baculinao said.

Beeber said red-light cameras are ineffective and unnecessary. The best way to reduce collisions is to lengthen yellow-light times, he said.

His committee is working with Democratic Assemblyman Adrin Nazarian of Sherman Oaks on a bill, A.B. 612, that will require the minimum yellow light time be increased by one second beyond the designated interval set by the California Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices for all intersections with red-light cameras.

If the bill is passed, red-light camera violations issued on intersections with the shorter yellow would be invalid, he said. Also, fewer violations would be issued since most occur within the first second when a light turns red, according to Nazarian's bill, which used research from the Texas Transportation Institute. The TTI concluded a one-second longer yellow light decreases accidents by 40 percent.

Caltrans increased the yellow-light time at an intersection near a freeway in the Bay Area town of Fremont, a city fighting off challenges to red-light cameras. The change resulted in a 76 percent drop in straight-through red-light camera violations at that intersection, said Roger Jones, an opponent of the cameras.

As little as three-tenths of a second on yellow-light times can reduce accidents, Beeber said.

West Hollywood added three-tenths of a second to all its stop lights, resulting in a 49 percent to 70 percent drop in violations at red-light camera intersections, Beeber said.

He's trying to convince Beverly Hills to do the same at a controversial red-light camera intersection at Wilshire and Whittier.

"My message is this: At a properly engineered intersection, you shouldn't have a lot of red-light running. And you don't need red-light cameras," Beeber said.

Jones said the evidence is overwhelming, but many smaller cities that have had the programs for 10 or 15 years don't want to reverse themselves out of pride or if the revenue stream is positive. Like a prosecutor who is shown to have convicted the wrong man, they want to save face.

"To come back 13 years later and say we made a mistake? That's like having egg on their face. It is embarrassing. So instead, they spin it as keeping the city safe, but it doesn't," Jones said.

Staff writer Ryan Hagen contributed to this article.

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Steve Scauzillo covers environment and transportation for the Southern California News Group. He has won two journalist of the year awards from the Angeles Chapter of the Sierra Club and is a recipient of the Aldo Leopold Award for Distinguished Editorial

Writing on environmental issues. Steve studied biology/chemistry when attending East Meadow High School and Nassau College in New York (he actually loved botany!) and then majored in social ecology at UCI until switching to journalism. He also earned a master's degree in media from Cal State Fullerton. He has been an adjunct professor since 2005. Steve likes to take the train, subway and bicycle – sometimes all three – to assignments and the newsroom. He is married to Karen E. Klein, a former journalist with Los Angeles Daily News, L.A. Times, Bloomberg and the San Fernando Valley Business Journal and now vice president of content management for a bank. They have two grown sons, Andy and Matthew. They live in Pasadena. Steve recently watched all of “Star Trek” the remastered original season one on Amazon, so he has an inner nerd.

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