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Red-light scofflaws will catch a break

By Rick Orlov and C.J. Lin, Staff Writers

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Los Angeles' much-maligned red-light traffic camera program officially ends this week, after the Police Commission on Tuesday ordered a halt to collecting fines from violators caught on film.

Eight months after city officials ordered the cameras turned off, the commission voted 3-0 to formally stop collecting unpaid tickets as of Saturday.

People who already paid their tickets, however, will not receive refunds, officials said.

The program faced sharp criticism from the public and City Council members last year, amid questions on their effectiveness and ability to generate revenue for the city.

"It was completely wrong," said Councilman Dennis Zine, who was among the council members calling for an end to the program. "It was strictly designed to bring in revenue and didn't do anything for public safety."

Other jurisdictions around the area, however, continue to use the cameras. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority, for example, uses them along the Orange Line busway in the San Fernando Valley.

Last year after the Los Angeles City Council ended the program as of Aug. 1, it continued the contract with American Traffic Solutions for the purpose of continuing to collect unpaid tickets.

Revenues from the program have continued to decline and the Police Commission vote ends the contract with the Arizona-based vendor as of Saturday, with no additional extensions for processing outstanding tickets.

Councilman Mitch Englander, who chairs the council's Public Safety Committee, agreed with Zine.

"It wasn't effective and was costing us more to enforce than we were getting back from it," Englander said.

Police Commission member Alan Skobin said he believed it was time to shut the operation down.

"If you look at the revenue, this comes from the public," Skobin said.

"Some people will decide to pay the tickets. Others will decide to put the money back into the economy in other ways."

L.A. was the first local jurisdiction to repeal the program last year, which included tickets for people who made rolling right-hand turns when the light was red.

"We need to warn people that this applies only to the city of Los Angeles," Zine said. "There are several other jurisdictions around the county that still have the red-light cameras and people can get tickets."

The order was issued as other jurisdictions debate the value of the program.

The city of Hawthorne this month renewed its red-light cameras contract for two years in a split vote by council members who debated the cameras' effect on public safety.

Like the controversy with L.A.'s cameras, critics of Hawthorne's program cast doubt on whether or not the cameras stopped collisions at intersections, improved driver behavior and was cost-effective to the cities that used them.

But the council also made it easier for the city to end the contract with Redflex Traffic Systems, stipulating that the program can be stopped with 30-days notice.

"It is efficient," said Capt. Keith Kauffman told the Hawthorne City Council. "Red-light violations are very difficult to enforce for policemen. You have to be able to see a violation occur with your own eyes at the same time that you're watching the red phase of the light, a vehicle, and the limit line.

"For a policeman, that's tough," Kauffman said.

Glendale, on the other hand, voluntarily ended its program in February, citing two contradicting opinions issued by a state appeals court on the legality of red-light camera programs.

The program had been successful for the city - cutting the number of citations issued in half during the time that cameras were in use, said Sgt. Tom Lorenz.

Still, the program was not cost-effective, he said.

"It just became cumbersome to have an officer sit in an office all day, viewing videos, sending notices, going to court," Lorenz said.

Metro uses 69 cameras on its county-wide system, including on the Valley's Orange Line and its Blue and Gold train lines.

The Metro board is expected in May to hear a report on whether it should continue the program.

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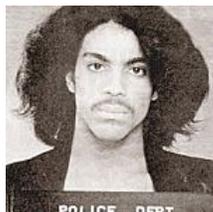
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