

Vista latest local city to pull plug on red-light cameras



In this 2014 file photo, cars drive past a red-light camera at the intersection of South Melrose Drive and Hacienda Drive in Vista. (Hayne Palmour IV/San Diego Union-Tribune)



By **Teri Figueroa**

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Vista this week became the latest San Diego County city to pull the plug on its red-light camera program, leaving just three cities in the region still using the controversial devices.

The Vista City Council voted 3-0 on Tuesday to yank the cameras by Dec. 31, with council members John Franklin, Amanda Rigby and Cody Campbell supporting the move and Mayor Judy Ritter and Councilman John Aguilera abstaining.

Franklin cited a number of reasons for axing the program, including the high cost of the citations and the cameras' extreme unpopularity among motorists.

“I have not heard from one citizen who has approached me and said please don’t take the cameras down,” Franklin said.

Several other cities in the county — including Oceanside, Escondido, Poway, San Diego and El Cajon — have ended their red-light camera programs in recent years. Nationwide, the number of cities using the cameras has decreased from a peak of 533 in 2012 to 467 in 2015, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, a nonprofit research organization funded by the auto insurance industry.

With Vista’s vote, [Encinitas](#), [Del Mar](#) and [Solana Beach](#) are the only cities in the county that will still use the cameras.

Cities that take the cameras down typically give a number of reasons, including the right to privacy and financial concerns. Some say the cameras so effectively discouraged red-light runners that cities could no longer cover the systems’ operating costs.

Vista has red-light cameras at five intersections, including the often-congested intersection of Vista Village Drive and South Santa Fe Avenue, and further down South Santa Fe at Civic Center Drive. The cameras will continue to generate tickets until the city officials informs sheriff’s officials otherwise, said Capt. Chuck Cinnamo, who heads up the Vista sheriff’s station.

Vista’s cameras are operated by RedFlex Traffic Systems. Company spokesman Michael Cavaioli said Wednesday that Redflex officials “obviously respect the decision of the city,” but he pointed to research that he said shows the cameras help make roads safer.

“Despite the positive safety impacts, elected officials are coming under pressure from a small but vocal minority of drivers,” Cavaioli said. “Elected officials are feeling the heat.”

Still, he said, more than 90 percent of their clients renew the contracts.

The decision to turn off the cameras comes less than nine months after the City Council supported renewing its contract with Redflex through 2018. Campbell, who is up for re-election in November, voted to keep the cameras in January but switched his position Tuesday.

Ritter and Aguilera said Wednesday that they abstained from the vote because they felt it was motivated by politics.

“I don’t want to put politics ahead of public safety,” Aguilera said.”

None of the council members asked for data regarding the number of crashes at the five sites. In 2014, the last time city staffers crunched the numbers, the data showed the total number of wrecks at the five intersections had dropped from 47 in 2004 to 22 in 2012.

Campbell said the issue has been “evolving” for him for the last four years. When the cameras went in, they were

needed, he said. The need is now reduced.

“I think we have far fewer accidents in Vista today than we did in the past,” he said.

During the meeting, Franklin said he did not appreciate “the disparagement of my motives.”

“Did I bring this issue forward at a time when voters are paying attention?” he said. “You're darn right I did.”

On Wednesday, he said he believes voters don't like the cameras “and I believe I delivered a victory to the Vista voters.”

Rigby, who is also running for re-election this year, has also long fought to end the city's red-light camera program.

The tickets for motorists caught by the cameras generally run roughly \$490 — not including optional traffic school.

From July 2015 though the end of June, the San Diego Superior Court handled nearly 12,300 red-light camera tickets. Vista, the biggest of the four cities, had the most tickets, with more than 4,500. Encinitas was number two on the list, with roughly 3,650 tickets. Solana Beach issued nearly 3,000 tickets — nearly a quarter of the red-light tickets issued in the county in that time frame. Del Mar, brought up the rear, with 1,141 tickets.

It's a guess if any of those cities — which also use Redflex — might pull the plug on the cameras. When the topic came up earlier this year, the city of Del Mar sent it to its finance committee for study. There has been no change since then.

“We are still looking at it,” Kristen Crane, Del Mar's acting city manager, said Wednesday.

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