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Lynnwood chief: Police jobs depend on enforcement cameras

Chief concedes his department relies on millions in ticket revenue

By [Scott North](#) and Rikki King, Herald Writers, heraldnet.com

LYNNWOOD -- Traffic-enforcement cameras were first installed here in 2007, and ever since Lynnwood police have insisted that the controversial program is all about safety. This week, Chief Steve Jensen conceded the city depends on the millions of dollars it gets from tickets, and if the money disappears he'll be laying off cops.

He also has asked for an outside investigation into whether two key officers, including a deputy chief who is Jensen's domestic partner, crossed ethical or legal lines in their dealings with the for-profit Arizona company that operates the cameras.

The program started out targeting traffic scofflaws and still does, but revenue -- more than [\\$4 million in 2010](#) -- has come to fuel Lynnwood's ongoing devotion to the cameras, Jensen said.

His admission came in an interview about emails obtained by The Herald through a public-records request. The emails depict two members of his department engaging in what Jensen called "not smart" correspondence with [American Traffic Solutions Inc.](#)

A deputy chief earlier this year asked the company about job prospects, even as she opened negotiations about renewing Lynnwood's multimillion-dollar camera contract, which expires in November.

Separately, the sergeant who leads Lynnwood's traffic division offered the Scottsdale, Ariz., company help with marketing cameras to other cities and with lobbying against legislation that would have reduced revenue from camera tickets in Washington.

None of that should have happened, Jensen said.

Lynnwood's [ethics policy](#) prohibits police and other officials from creating even the appearance of a conflict of interest, the chief said. He's asked Everett police to conduct an

internal investigation on his department's behalf to ensure officers haven't engaged in misconduct.

"I can guarantee you there is no collusion with ATS, or anyone getting financial gain or whatnot -- that would really surprise me," Jensen said.

The chief asked for an outside agency's help to avoid a conflict of his own.

Deputy Police Chief Karen Manser, who wrote the email about job prospects, is the chief's longtime partner. They share homes in King County and Arizona. City officials have publicly acknowledged the relationship for years.

Manser and Jensen and others from the city traveled to Arizona in May for a conference hosted by American Traffic Solutions. Those who attended from the police department paid their own travel expenses, Jensen said.

Manser on March 26 wrote to an ATS official, saying that she'd be at the conference. Her email pointed out that the company's \$648,000-a-year contract with Lynnwood was set to expire in November.

"Let me know when you might be available to chat about it on the phone," Manser wrote. "I would like to get ahead of the game on getting it ready for renewal."

Manser then added a postscript noting that the company reportedly was doing well and that she was hoping to move soon.

"If you have any idea if I might qualify for something with ATS let's talk. Thanks!"

This week Manser said she never applied for a job with the camera company and has no plans to.

"If you are looking for something evil out of this it doesn't exist," she said in an email.

Manser said she long ago decided that she wanted to leave Lynnwood for Arizona, and she applied for work at several police departments and companies there. She also said that aside from the initial email and some follow-ups, contract negotiations have been handled by others at the city, including finance and purchasing officials.

Jensen said he doesn't believe Manser did anything inappropriate but views what she wrote to the camera company as "not smart."

"I would prefer that wasn't written there," he said.

Meantime, Jensen and others among the department's top brass said they were surprised to learn that Sgt. Wayne "Kawika" Davis, who supervises the traffic unit, had been using city resources, including email, to offer himself for marketing on behalf of American

Traffic Solutions.

While inviting the company to participate in a motorcycle officers' trade conference, he also asked to be put in touch with the camera company's marketing department.

"I have some ideas that really could market ATS in WA, ID, OR and Canada," he wrote on May 19. "I know you are already in some of those areas; however, there is a lot more business to be had."

Jensen didn't know about the marketing offer, he said. Neither did Deputy Police Chief Bryan Stanifer, who oversees the department's internal investigations.

"That will be addressed," Stanifer said Tuesday.

Davis also recently became involved with the [Washington Council of Police and Sheriffs](#), a law enforcement lobbying group. In emails, he volunteered to be a voice for the organization in encouraging legislators to promote traffic-enforcement cameras.

Revenue from the cameras is keeping cops on the job, Davis wrote in February.

"ATS has our backs and the interest of all our cities involved. In addition, the City of Lynnwood itself and the Lynnwood Police Department must also do everything we can to ensure this program continues unhindered. Any negative change to the program means more layoffs and program cuts," Davis wrote.

Davis sent copies of the emails about lobbying to a representative of the traffic camera company, plus Jensen and other Lynnwood police supervisors.

The Herald earlier this year reported on how traffic-enforcement revenue in Lynnwood [far outstripped](#) that of any other local government, and how 75 percent of tickets came from cameras. Davis responded at the time with [a guest commentary](#). He extolled the safety benefits of cameras and downplayed the significance of ticket revenue.

Manser this week said that inside the police department, she and others have long connected camera revenue to preserving police jobs.

Jensen said that wasn't the plan -- it just worked out that way.

The city's love affair with cameras started innocently enough, he said. It was people on the City Council who first suggested the technology as a means to tackle serious traffic problems, including red-light running and speeding in school zones.

The city offered itself as a test community for cameras in Washington but wasn't chosen. Once state lawmakers approved the devices in 2005, Lynnwood began pursuing the idea.

Ticket revenue from cameras didn't come up as a motivation, Jensen said.

But the money started flowing just as the city's other revenue streams, such as sales taxes, began to dry up.

Over time, the camera revenue became a bigger and bigger portion of the city's general fund. Most cities in Snohomish County [draw 1 percent to 4 percent](#) of revenue from traffic enforcement. About 16 percent of Lynnwood's spending in 2010 was covered by traffic tickets, most of which came from cameras.

If the city gave up the cameras now, Jensen said, he could expect to lose seven or eight officers.

The department already has [lost nearly a quarter of its cops](#) in the past year. Some left expecting layoffs, others jumped ship.

This year, the city is looking to make deep cuts to cover a projected \$3.5 million revenue shortfall by the end of 2012. Mayor Don Gough also wants the city to set aside another \$1.9 million to ensure its long-term financial survival.

Police say their [data is inconclusive](#) on whether the cameras are reducing crashes at intersections where red-light cameras have been installed. Crashes increased in some locations and are down in others.

What role the cameras will continue to play is unclear. A draft of a new contract with ATS has been prepared for the city's signature.

Lynnwood so far in 2011 has seen a dip in revenue from camera tickets compared to 2010, Jill O'Cain, the city's municipal court administrator, recently told other city officials.

She hopes that's because people are driving differently.

Jensen said he thinks drivers now are more cautious in Lynnwood.

What's clear is that Lynnwood needs the money camera tickets bring in, the chief said.

"Right, wrong or indifferent, it is a significant piece of the revenue puzzle," he said.

Scott North: north@heraldnet.com, 425-339-3431.