



# San Mateo Dumps Red Light Camera Program After A Decade Of Continuous Failure

[\(Mis\)Uses of Technology](#)

from the *if-it-ain't-working,-don't-fix-it* dept

Mon, Jul 29th 2019 10:47am — [Tim Cushing](#)

Earlier this month, the city of San Mateo, California, [decided to end its red light camera program](#). The official reason given is pure spin -- a transparent attempt by the city to distance itself from its failed program.

*According to the city, an evaluation of the program determined that the safety benefits of the program have plateaued as it has also become more challenging to administer.*

You see? No one's responsible for this mess. It's just entropy or something. Not, oh I don't know, the fact that the city couldn't run the program competently to begin with. If safety is the stated goal, what the hell's going on here?

*The decision comes after the discovery of an error in yellow-light timing at the intersection of Saratoga Drive and Hillsdale Boulevard. The yellow-light timing when driving south on Saratoga Drive was inadvertently set to 3.4 seconds during a construction project. The state-mandated minimum for yellow lights is 3.6 seconds.*

Thanks to this, almost 1,000 tickets are being dismissed and refunds are being issued. But this decision to call the whole thing off shouldn't have taken a decade. Dave Price of the Palo Alto Daily Post [points out the city has been aware of yellow-light timing issues since 2009](#).

*In January 2009, the Post received a tip that the yellow light was set too short at an intersection monitored by a red-light camera in San Mateo. Drivers were getting caught in the intersection unexpectedly and given tickets.*

*So a Post reporter set up a video camera that records 30 frames every second and recorded the stoplight cycle. He then checked the recording frame by frame and discovered that, indeed, the yellow light was shorter than federal regulations.*

*Then we contacted an outside expert to check our work to make sure our conclusions were correct.*

*They were, and we printed the story.*

The response from the city back in 2009 was just as exonerative, but nowhere near as littered with bureaucratese. The city claimed the Daily Post was "irresponsible" and only published the story for the clicks. The city also claimed the Daily Post was wrong. It backed this claim with zero evidence. The city never tested the lights itself.

Six years later, an NBC affiliate performed the same testing at San Mateo intersections. Again, it was determined the city's yellow light timing was below federal guidelines. This time, the city refunded 948 tickets.

The city did nothing to prevent this from happening again. So, naturally, it happened again. And, finally, the city has decided to toss the program, rather than be forced to periodically confront its failure to run a legal red light camera program.

[I'm sure the money](#) had something to do with the refusal to kill this program earlier. According to numbers obtained by Price, the city netted at least \$266,000 last year from red light cameras. Its partner -- Redflex -- did just about as well, collecting \$239,000 in fees. That's two sets of vested interests with quite a bit of power between them.

Behind all the cash-grabbing is the [repeatedly disproven claim](#) that unmanned cameras with the power to automatically issue tickets make drivers safer. It doesn't work anywhere else. It didn't work in San Mateo.

*Supporters of red-light cameras have argued that they reduce T-bone crashes by people running the light. But studies have shown that over time, the number of rear-end crashes caused by people trying to avoid a photo ticket surpasses the T-bone crashes. In San Mateo, **the number of accidents at the red-light camera intersections are higher now than they were when the cameras went in.***

Thankfully, the program is dead and seems unlikely to be resurrected. More cities should make their drivers safer by doing the same thing.

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Supporters of red-light cameras have argued that they reduce T-bone crashes by people running the light. But studies have shown that over time, the number of rear-end crashes caused by people trying to avoid a photo ticket surpasses the T-bone crashes. In San Mateo, the number of accidents at the red-light camera intersections are higher now than they were when the cameras went in.

...well *yeah*. That's the expected *and desired* outcome, because not all crashes are created equal. Most rear-end collisions are harmless or mostly harmless; I've been rear-ended twice with no damage to myself or my vehicle, for example. But a T-bone collision is likely to cause severe damage to both the car and its passengers.

Therefore, if you can trade a T-bone collision for a rear-end collision, or even for two or three rear-end collisions, you're getting a good bargain. In the calculus of actual damage done, these "increased collisions" are actually coming out ahead.

—[Mason Wheeler](#)

”

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**Aaron Bauman**, 29 Jul 2019 @ 10:56am

### **Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater**

Automated enforcement, in general, has great potential to make driving safer, especially for people of color.

As this blog has reported on many many times, police abuse of communities of color erodes the safety of many vulnerable citizens.

Offloading traffic enforcement to cameras and other automated enforcement mechanisms has the potential to eliminate racially biased policing, as well as improve the safety of the most dangerous activity most of us participate in routinely.

We shouldn't jump to abandon automated enforcement schemes just because a few places have screwed up the implementation.

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**Gary** ([profile](#)), 29 Jul 2019 @ 11:08am

### **Re: Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater**

But a decade with of data shows little to no safety benefit for intersections with the cameras. It's just a failed experiment in automated tolls.

The police don't seem to need an actual reason to pull over PoC when they want to.

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**Sneetje** ([profile](#)), 29 Jul 2019 @ 12:13pm

### **Re: Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater**

>Automated enforcement, in general, has great potential to make driving safer, especially for people of color.

Citation please, because automated enforcement (also as documented on this blog) nearly always comes with a torpedo to due process. Guess which group is disproportionately affected when that happens?

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**Anonymous Coward**, 29 Jul 2019 @ 1:54pm

### **Re: Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater**

Does your automated panacea include facial regression?  
Why would you assume this would not be racist?

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**Anonymous Coward**, 29 Jul 2019 @ 2:22pm

### **Re: Re: Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater**

facial regression

Are you implying something about genetic lineage?

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**Anonymous Coward**, 29 Jul 2019 @ 3:23pm

## **Re: Re: Re: Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater**

Damn spell checker

It should be Facial Recognition, although it could be called regressive

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**David**, 29 Jul 2019 @ 11:25am

### **Bit disingenuous**

Supporters of red-light cameras have argued that they reduce T-bone crashes by people running the light. But studies have shown that over time, the number of rear-end crashes caused by people trying to avoid a photo ticket surpasses the T-bone crashes. In San Mateo, the number of accidents at the red-light camera intersections are higher now than they were when the cameras went in.

Even when discounting that a significant ratio of the rear-end crashes is due to the substandard short yellow phases, a "T-bone crash" (never heard that term before) tends to cause a whole lot worse damage and injuries than a rear-end crash after excessive braking.

So even while the program as executed did not reduce the *number* of accidents, it might have reduced the average or even accumulated severity.

Not an excuse for the accident increasing yellowlight cash grab, of course.

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Sneeje ([profile](#)), 29 Jul 2019 @ 12:16pm

### **Re: Bit disingenuous**

So, studies of this have been mostly negative. Some found a lower degree of medical injury, but the rest found it was a wash or higher.

The intersection itself appears to be a major factor, along with the length of the yellow lights (4s or greater lowers injury across the board).

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Anonymous Coward, 29 Jul 2019 @ 1:56pm

### **Re: Bit disingenuous**

A lot of assumptions there.

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Scote, 29 Jul 2019 @ 2:11pm

### **Re: Bit disingenuous**

"So even while the program as executed did not reduce the number of accidents, it might have reduced the average or even accumulated severity."

Given that they could have reduced collisions with a longer yellow and a delayed red/green timing, there is no excuse for using the red light camera at all.

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**Bobvious**, 29 Jul 2019 @ 2:12pm

### **Re: Bit disingenuous**

As long as you keep your speed under 94 MPH you should be ok

<https://www.techdirt.com/articles/20180227/20031839326/cop-hits-womans-car-94-mph-killing-her-infant-police-arrest-woman-negligent-homicide.shtml>

Also, the road (road B) perpendicular to the currently-turning-yellow light (road A) should be facing a red. Once the yellow phase on road A has elapsed there will be a period of overlap where both lights are red. This is the opportunity to prevent t-bones. A slight extension of the perpendicular red phase on road B would allow cars on road A to clear the collision zone before road B gets the green.

Roads have sensor loops in them, and these can be used to detect speed and position to allow dynamic changes of the phase timing, but this falls in the "too hard" basket.

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**Anonymous Coward**, 29 Jul 2019 @ 3:26pm

### **Re: Re: Bit disingenuous**

Another way to prevent t-bones is to have spikes come up out of the road surface a few seconds after the light turns red.

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**Hugo S Cunningham** ([profile](#)), 29 Jul 2019 @ 4:52pm

### **Re: Re: Re: Bit disingenuous**

How long would it be until tire sellers bribe authorities to shorten the interval before the spikes come up?

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**Anonymous Coward**, 30 Jul 2019 @ 7:08am

### **Re: Re: Re: Re: Bit disingenuous**

Not long at all.

I remember the local windshield replacement people bitching to the state because there was talk of using more salt and less gravel on the roads during the winter.

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ECA ([profile](#)), 29 Jul 2019 @ 11:26am

## **AND..**

If they had fixed, reset the timing on the light it ALL would have gone away...and no one would have cared..

The best ones Iv ever seen, Turn yellow and start Flashing..ANd NOW are LED.. Love those LED ones, you can see them even with the sun is behind them.. LOVE flashing, because its an attention getter..

The problem, that people are doing, is Green is go, and yellow is GO FASTER if you are in 100' of the light..

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**Anonymous Coward**, 29 Jul 2019 @ 9:20pm

## **Re: AND..**

The t-bone impacts occur when people forget that "yellow means go faster-IF THERE'S NO ONE IN THE LEFT TURN LANE FACING YOU".

If you see a yellow, check to see if someone is trying to turn left before the red light. If you are trying to turn left and see a yellow light, do not assume your "legal right of way" is going to carry much weight with an oncoming vehicle.

This all comes down to human error, and sadly, it's human error correctable by easily practiced driving habits.

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**Mason Wheeler** ([profile](#)), 29 Jul 2019 @ 11:29am

Supporters of red-light cameras have argued that they reduce T-bone crashes by people running the light. But studies have shown that over time, the number of rear-end crashes caused by people trying to avoid a photo ticket surpasses the T-bone crashes. In San Mateo, the number of accidents at the red-light camera intersections are higher now than they were when the cameras went in.

...well *yeah*. That's the expected *and desired* outcome, because not all crashes are created equal. Most rear-end collisions are harmless or mostly harmless; I've been rear-ended twice with no damage to myself or my vehicle, for example. But a T-bone collision is likely to cause severe damage to both the car and its passengers.

Therefore, if you can trade a T-bone collision for a rear-end collision, or even for two or three rear-end collisions, you're getting a good bargain. In the calculus of actual damage done, these "increased collisions" are actually coming out ahead.

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**Anonymous Coward**, 29 Jul 2019 @ 11:47am

**Re:**

The damage, and injuries, have more to do with how hard the collision is. T-bones are frequently hard, because someone is racing through the lights, and rear ends are lighter because the person behind was probably already braking. Get hit as hard from behind as a typical t-bone, and you are just as likely to be injured.

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**Mason Wheeler** ([profile](#)), 29 Jul 2019 @ 12:23pm

**Re: Re:**

Get hit as hard from behind as a typical t-bone, and you are just as likely to be injured.

This is simply not true, because of basic physics. There's a lot more space in the "Y" axis (forwards/backwards) than the "X" axis (sideways) on virtually any vehicle. (This may well be different for [Smart cars](#).) This provides room to attenuate the force of the collision (aka "crumple zones") across space that simply isn't there on the X axis. Therefore, the same amount of force of the collision will translate to noticeably less actual force acting on the driver's body.

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**Anonymous Coward**, 29 Jul 2019 @ 12:29pm

This is only true if your vehicle is a perfect cube with the driver located in the center and a perfectly symmetrical distribution of mass throughout.

Most vehicles do not fit this description.

Generally speaking, a vehicle is an oblong shape, two to three times as long as it is wide or tall. The driver is positioned against one side. The majority of the vehicle's mass is located against the front. There are bumpers on the front and rear edges. The driver has a chair behind him and a seat belt in front of him. Usually he has an airbag in front of him as well. Occasionally he will also have an airbag beside him. There is often a trunk in the rear.

In the event of a fender bender, the colliding vehicles will generally have two to six feet, each, of steel, aluminum, titanium, rubber, or kevlar that must be bent, twisted, crumpled, or crushed before the impact is delivered to the driver.

In a driver's side impact, you have about six inches. That door is it. Additionally, the vehicle is far more likely to roll over, as the force is directed along one of the shorter axis .

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**JoeCool** ([profile](#)), 29 Jul 2019 @ 12:04pm

**Re:**

The problem is that you aren't trading one to one, or even two to one. TBones are rare, and not normally the result of someone trying to beat an "orange" light. They're nearly always caused by someone turning left in front of oncoming traffic (both having the green), or by someone flat missing a red light altogether and driving into the intersection in the middle of the green the other direction. Neither are prevented by red-light cameras.

And just because YOU suffered no injuries or damage in your rear-end collisions doesn't mean no one does. Rear-end collisions are one of the primary causes of injuries in car accidents; mainly whip-lash in the people hit, and facial injuries to the people do the hitting, both of which can be very serious injuries.

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**James Burkhardt** ([profile](#)), 29 Jul 2019 @ 12:13pm

**Re:**

And if cities were willing to state that they expect that red light cameras would increase rear ends but that the reduction in injuries and fatalities would on the balance be worth the increased property damage, that is a discussion to have. But few do. Because that isn't the purpose of red light

cameras. The near universal way municipalities reduce yellow light duration after installation betrays that the installation is a profit motive, not a safety one.

Rear endings are increasing in part because the yellow light is significantly shorter than expected, so an otherwise safe and legal entry into the intersection creates a need to stop suddenly. So some portion of these impacts are avoidable collisions, created by changes driven not by safety, but a profit motive.

That of course discounts that this city, and others, have shortened yellow light times to below the minimum safe timing set forth by the DOT, meaning the intersections are explicitly less safe in furtherance of a profit motive.

I agree that number of accidents is a poor metric, but I am not sure that violent rear endings, where the second party was not anticipating the need to stop, are so much better. As someone who spent time in a hospital and lost 2 cars in a year to that very issue (A limited stop road just off US101 in San Jose has a serious issue with drivers not anticipating the need to stop even when traffic was at a standstill), there was a reduced incidence of injury, but I suffered significant financial loss with work loss and inadequate public transportation (it took months to get insurance payouts finalized, and I couldn't get a new car loan until that process was finished).

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ECA ([profile](#)), 29 Jul 2019 @ 12:15pm

**Re:**

hint please...

think of what is required for a T-Bone..

its NOT a yellow light.

For someone to be going Fast 30-40mph..

Would mean they went thru a RED light.

Because of 1 thing..the OTHER side traffic isnt MOVING YET..

And...that lane of traffic must be CLEAR, no one ahead of the idiot..

And a SMART person looks down the road before Moving forward into a

intersection...EVEN when no one is STOPPED on the other side..because of idiots...

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Sneeje ([profile](#)), 29 Jul 2019 @ 12:19pm

**Re:**

There are more and more studies now, and I don't think they show that, not conclusively anyway. If you have a broad review of the studies done to show that, please share. My reading of a number of them shows that the intersection itself has a great deal of influence and that the greater number + severity can often wipe out any gains from the cameras.

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ECA ([profile](#)), 29 Jul 2019 @ 5:56pm

**Re: Re:**

90% of the problems I tend to notice...  
all are trying to HURRY...  
And over 20 years ago, cities had GREAT idea...thta never happened..  
CHANGE Business times, to that not Everyone gets Off at same time.  
Even 15 minute differences can make travel allot easier..

But who wants to go early or stay late?? it could solve Some problems of Many persons in a rush..

Rush rush rush and forget all the training that you have had over 10-20-30 years...

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**Anonymous Coward**, 30 Jul 2019 @ 7:14am

**Re:**

"Most rear-end collisions are harmless"

I suppose that depends upon your definition of harm. Some may look at the deductible as being very harmful to their financial situation. Many victims of accidents have to eat the cost because the person who caused the accident lacks insurance or the insurance company refuses to pay. There also is the loss of time associated with obtaining a replacement vehicle. Innocent victims of automobile accidents hardly ever are made whole.

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**McGyver** ([profile](#)), 29 Jul 2019 @ 12:04pm

## **It's all just a revenue generator now.**

In my area, when these devices first came out years ago they were used at problem intersections where people actually ran lights. They mostly did what they were supposed to and they accomplished good work.

Then both the state and counties realized these could be used to generate income. They sent out flocks of seniors and summer employees to count traffic at major intersections to see where they could get the most money.

These cameras mostly as far as I know belong to private companies that service, set up and monitor them... and keep a lion's share of the income these devices generate.

I've seen one accident caused a camera that flashed for no reason at all, and watched what could have been a terrible accident caused by a camera flashing for no reason, where an elderly driver swerved slightly while braking hard, causing the car in back to mount the curb to avoid him, almost hitting several kids waiting to cross the road.

On a nearby elevated highway at night, I've seen cars drift out of their lanes because from the surface street below multiple pulsing camera flashes (at road height) distracted them.

Driving in back of a friend, I watched a camera take a photo of his car seconds after the light changed to green... a week or so later he got a ticket (linked to a video) showing a different car going through a red light... it was clear in the photo of his plate and the blurry video, the cars were not even the same color... without going to court they would not dismiss the ticket so my friend apathetically paid it. Sitting at a red light all alone late at night, I often see the cameras take pictures of cars going through green lights, many times one or more cars slam on their brakes probably thinking they missed a red light or something.

Most people I know have some negative story about the cameras or near collisions they've caused.

No one holds these red light camera companies responsible, either for honesty or safety and no way any government agency will take responsibility.

It's a scam at taxpayer expense... it was a nice idea when it first began, but like all good things, too many of these programs have become corrupted by greed and apathy.

Let them all rot until someone finds a way to keep these things honest, safe and reliable.

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**Anonymous Coward**, 29 Jul 2019 @ 1:23pm

### **A minor, but wrong, point...**

And, finally, the city has decided to toss the program, rather than be forced to periodically confront its failure to run a legal red light camera program.

Um, no. The failure wasn't in "running a legal red light camera program". The failure was "setting the fricking yellow light timing correctly." Or more accurately, "not getting caught when shorting the yellow light time."

As it is, they'll just have live officers issuing tickets for the same offense, when they're in the area.

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**ECA** ([profile](#)), 30 Jul 2019 @ 12:27pm

### **Re: A minor, but wrong, point...**

And as soon as they got the 1stcomplaint, FIXED IT..and nothing could or would be illegal..and there would be no further truth..

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**Anonymous Coward**, 29 Jul 2019 @ 1:42pm

I'll say this every time one of these stories come up. When red-light cameras first started appearing, I thought they would be useful to stop people from blowing through red lights. But it was Techdirt that constantly (and accurately) explained

how not only do they not prevent accidents, but they make things worse by causing people to slam on their brakes out of fear of getting a ticket.

Having correctly timed yellow lights is the best way to improve safety. This is well known and well documented.

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**Anonymous Coward**, 29 Jul 2019 @ 3:29pm

Do any of these "smart" vehicles, that can drive themselves, watch and correct an errant driver who is about to enter an intersection where their path is red?

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**That One Guy** ([profile](#)), 29 Jul 2019 @ 8:48pm

### **Easy fix**

*Six years later, an NBC affiliate performed the same testing at San Mateo intersections. Again, it was determined the city's yellow light timing was below federal guidelines. This time, **the city refunded 948 tickets.***

Make it so any refunds after the first time come from the *personal* bank accounts of those in charge of the program and who have given it the go-ahead and there would be no need to keep trying to hammer the point home.

Of *course* those in charge of the program ignored that pesky 'evidence' showing that the timing was below federal guidelines, because for *years* the program was highly profitable and not something they're going to be quick to get rid of. Make it so their *personal* wealth is on the line though and suddenly following those guidelines becomes a *lot* more important.

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**Anonymous Coward**, 29 Jul 2019 @ 9:35pm

### **Re: Easy fix**

Somehow, our local governments have been allowed to become minor-league versions of the "Pigs At The Trough Department" most of our federal agencies have become: The Pentagon, FEMA, DHS, NASA, the 92 agencies we need to fight poverty...our police departments are just little junior versions of the same grift.

Solving actual problems?? Successfully addressing issues? Heresy! That kind of thing can only reduce budgets! So every effort becomes an exercise in "revenue generation". And every new problem, underserved community, and oppressed group requires a very large number of very well-paid white collar professionals to ponder and write grant proposals.

Guess it isn't surprising we still have little bits of crime, poverty and injustice still hanging around, despite the assurances I've heard from politicians over the years that THIS TIME we were going to get a really BIG pile of money and fix things!

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**Anonymous Coward**, 30 Jul 2019 @ 7:21am

**Re: Re: Easy fix**

Simplistic overview of complex issues usually results in large assumptions which led to misconceptions. Acting upon said misconceptions brings us to where we are today.

Fight poverty ... lol, one of the biggest lies ever.

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**Anonymous Coward**, 29 Jul 2019 @ 11:33pm

Or put another way, they've finally realized that asset forfeiture is where the real money's at.

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**Anonymous Coward**, 30 Jul 2019 @ 7:21am

**Re:**

Notice they do not steal from the rich and influential?

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**Anonymous Coward**, 30 Jul 2019 @ 9:15am

**Re: Re:**

No-brainer, that one.

The rich and influential can afford lawsuits to fight back, even if it means draining a portion of their considerable resources.

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**zippy**, 30 Jul 2019 @ 9:10am

Left turn arrows should also be constant, regardless of color. And last just as long as the regular light. You shouldn't have to be stuck sitting through one or more green lights waiting for an opening to turn because the arrow went off and didn't come back right away. It should always be there so you know exactly when you can turn, and it would reduce T-bones caused by people misjudging when to turn when there's no arrow. They turn too soon or too late and get hit, when if an arrow had been on, they'd have been much more likely to follow that and not hit or get it in the first place.

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**stine**, 31 Jul 2019 @ 9:20am

**red light timing**

The length of the red light and green light should be based on the traffic volume. The length of the yellow light should be set based on the speed of the approaching road. The way to make this happen is to have the programming request that the speed limit be entered, not the time. This would be a very trivial change for the manufacturers. This would also allow the light timing to be easily checked: look at the speed limit sign, walk to the box and look at the value entered in to the speed limit field. If they match, you get a ticket, if they don't match, not only do you not get a ticket, but someone in the DoT gets fired.

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