

Cameras may catch red-light runner but not reduce accidents

By Chris Seymour
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Amarillo motorists may soon be seeing red-light cameras, but whether they will cut traffic accidents is debatable.

City commissioners, in an informal vote at their July 31 meeting, chose to proceed with plans to add the cameras at select intersections.

The cameras would be used to issue citations, with the civil penalty set at \$75 per offense and an additional \$25 if late, to red-light runners by photographing the violators' license plates.

The cameras are also capable of detecting and ticketing speeders, but that is currently prohibited by state legislation.

Commissioners hope the cameras will cut down on accidents in some of Amarillo's more dangerous intersections.

But critics say the cameras will only trade one type of accident for another — namely, angle collisions for rear-end collisions.

According to some studies, they are at least half right. Data have shown cameras are correlated with increases in both types of collisions.

A 2005 Virginia Department of Transportation report stated, "The associa-

tion of the cameras with angle crashes differed among jurisdictions, although a preponderance of test results suggested an increase."

According to the same VDOT study, "Cameras were associated with an increase of between 31 percent and 54 percent for rear-end crashes overall."

The industry claims this increase in rear-end collisions is only temporary, but the same study found otherwise.

"The cameras were not associated with a decrease in rear-end crashes over time after the initial increase that followed camera installation," the report said.

The red-light cameras may also be to blame for an increase in injury accidents. Though the numbers varied widely in Virginia's study, accident injuries were down in only one jurisdiction, but were up anywhere from six to 89 percent in all others.

"A city-by-city assessment ... showed significant increases in the number of injuries and accidents at intersections employing photo enforcement," the report went on to say.

To make matters worse, a 2006 Winnipeg, Canada, city audit found, "The number of insurance claims for

accidents, injuries and property damage expenses went up significantly at sites using camera enforcement in the year following the introduction of the devices."

According to a Washington Post analysis: "The number of crashes at locations with cameras more than doubled, from 365 collisions in 1998 to 755 last year (2004).

"Injury and fatal crashes climbed 81 percent, from 144 such wrecks to 262. Broadside crashes, also known as right-angle or T-bone collisions, rose 30 percent, from 81 to 106 during that time frame."

The cost of the devices has also been an issue. According to information provided by the City Commission, it would cost \$4,800 per month per approach to implement the use of the cameras.

With four approaches per intersection, it would cost \$19,200 per month to operate one intersection if all four approaches were equipped with cameras. That is \$230,400 per year for one intersection.

At \$75 per citation, more than 3,000 citations would have to be issued and collected per year to pay for one full intersection.

Camera vendors say, however, that



Downtown Amarillo. (Photo by Ralph Duke)

covering all four approaches of an intersection is very rare.

Collection is another caveat. The vendors, though some boast a collection rate of 80 to 85 percent, have no ability to report delinquent payments to collection agencies.

The only threat is the potential to reject the renewal of vehicle registration to those with outstanding fines.

The cameras do not photograph the driver of the vehicle. Cameras are positioned to show the license plate and

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