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RED LIGHT CAMERAS CHALLENGED IN COURT AND BY SOME U.S. LEGISLATORS

About 60 U.S. communities are using red light cameras, and research shows big safety benefits. The cameras are reducing not only red light running but also intersection crashes. In Oxnard, California, front-into-side collisions have been reduced 32 percent since cameras were installed. Front-into-side crashes involving injuries are down 68 percent. Surveys indicate strong public support for cameras in communities with and without them. Despite these pluses, red light camera enforcement is being challenged, and a flurry of recent media attention has focused on the challenges.

Challenge based on false claim that re-timing signal lights would eliminate violations

A report from the office of U.S. House of Representatives Majority Leader Richard K. Arney criticizes red light cameras, claiming the solution to red light running is to lengthen yellow signal intervals. He claims that some communities with red light cameras have shortened the yellow lights to raise revenue by increasing red light violations.

It's true that a too-short yellow light can lead to red light running and more crashes, but even correct traffic signal timing doesn't eliminate the problems. Before intersections in Oxnard were equipped with red light cameras, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety researchers verified that the signals were timed properly and collected violation data. The finding was an average of about one red light violation every two hours around the clock. After the cameras were installed, violations were reduced by about 40 percent.

Arney's report cites no convincing evidence that yellow signals have been shortened. Instead, it cites unverified anecdotes — for example, a television report that the city of Beaverton, Oregon, shortened the yellow intervals at intersections with cameras “to accommodate camera enforcement.” According to Arney, Beaverton “has been caught red-handed playing with signal timing on lights that have red light cameras.”

The facts indicate otherwise. Arney's office didn't contact local traffic engineers, who would have explained that signal timing was reviewed when the cameras were installed at

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five Beaverton intersections. At two of these, the yellow signal intervals were lengthened, not shortened, and the intervals at the other three intersections weren't changed (they've remained unchanged for at least seven years). If yellow intervals are shortened, intersections become more dangerous, and it simply isn't credible to believe traffic engineers are conspiring with city officials to do this in order to raise revenue by increasing red light running.

Armeý's report claims yellow intervals have been getting shorter not only at camera sites but at other intersections. However, the trend has been to lengthen, not shorten, yellow signal intervals. Based in large part on research by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, the Institute of Transportation Engineers adopted a new method for setting the duration of yellow signals that increased the times.

Challenge based on false claim that cameras invade privacy

Robert L. Barr is another U.S. Congressman who finds fault with red light cameras, saying they "infringe on people's liberty and privacy." He's not the only one making this claim. The privacy issue often is raised, but it's an empty issue because privacy rights are limited on public roads. Nobody objects to cameras in public places like banks, which are installed to deter robbers and, if necessary, photograph them. Yet red light running kills many more people than bank robbers. The people making the privacy claims need to explain why taking pictures of vehicles violating traffic laws infringes on the privacy of the drivers. What about the rights of motorists and others on the road who are put at considerable risk by the red light runners?

Challenge based on false claim that cameras are unconstitutional

A recent court ruling on San Diego's red light camera program attracted national news coverage, most of which focused on the court's criticism of some aspects of the city's program. A more important, though less publicized, aspect of the ruling is that the court declined to declare unconstitutional the California law permitting cameras, including a provision that requires registered owners of vehicles photographed running red lights to identify the drivers. The court allowed the practice of delegating to contractors the screening of photos and referral to police for determination about whether citations should be issued. Nothing in this court decision points to anything inherently wrong with the reliability of camera evidence in general. However, the court did reject the evidence specifically from San Diego's red light cameras because of the city's "lack of oversight over the system" and "the method of compensation" of its contractor.

The San Diego ruling indicates how other courts could rule on future challenges. It also may lead officials across the country to change how they reimburse the contractors who provide and install red light cameras and who may also process the photos and screen them for possible violations. To avoid legal complications, officials in jurisdictions where cameras are under consideration should consider following the procedures for red light cameras spelled out by the National Committee on Uniform Traffic Laws and Ordinances, an organization that publishes the *Uniform Vehicle Code* and drafts model law legislation.

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