

5-year snapshot in Tacoma: Red-light cameras cut wrecks

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Six years ago, Tacoma officials began installing cameras to catch red-light runners at seven intersections, saying they wanted to reduce accidents and make the streets safer.

Early on, traffic accident data didn't show a clear correlation between the cameras and improved safety. But lately, all the intersections with cameras are seeing slightly fewer accidents than before.

Between 2008 and 2012 — the five-year period after the cameras were installed — reported accidents were down overall at intersections with red-light cameras, according to a News Tribune analysis of city accident data.

Sgt. Frank Richmond, who oversees the Tacoma Police Department's traffic unit, said the cameras have not only reduced the number of collisions at the city's seven monitored intersections, but also the severity of accidents.

"We don't go to those intersections for big accidents like we used to — now it's just fender benders," Richmond said.

Locations for red-light cameras were determined by traffic lieutenants who study traffic "hot spots" and traffic flow throughout the city. Since the start of the camera program, the city has contracted with Redflex, a company based in Arizona, to operate red-light cameras at the following Tacoma intersections:

- North 26th and Pearl streets.
- East 38th Street and McKinley Avenue.
- South 72nd Street and Pacific Avenue.
- South 84th and South Hosmer streets.
- South 56th and South Oakes streets.
- South 56th Street and South Tacoma Way.
- South 74th Street and South Tacoma Way.

Tacoma officials, responding to a public-records request from The News Tribune, provided data on the numbers of accidents at each intersection between 2003 and 2012, five years before and after the cameras were installed.

On average, each intersection with a red-light camera saw a drop in both injury and noninjury accidents after 2007.

Some intersections have seen total accidents decline by about half. In the five years before red-light cameras went up at South 84th and Hosmer, the intersection had an average of 18.8 accidents a year. In the five years after the cameras, 8.4 collisions occurred there each year — a 55 percent decrease.

Similar results have been recorded at South 72nd and Pacific, where an average of 34.4 accidents took place yearly before the cameras, while the yearly average afterward was 20.8 accidents. That's a decrease of about 40 percent.

Other intersections — such as South 74th and South Tacoma Way — saw more modest improvement. Between 2003 and 2007, that corner had an average of 16.4 accidents a year, which decreased to an average of 14 accidents annually in the five years after the cameras went up.

Not all photo-enforced intersections saw immediate results. In fact, the number of accidents briefly rose in two places shortly after the city put cameras there.

Those intersections — South 74th and South Tacoma Way, and East 38th and McKinley — saw a spike in total accidents in 2009. Since then, however, total accidents at those cameras have fallen below pre-camera levels.

Tacoma Mayor Marilyn Strickland said the trend of declining accident numbers at red-light camera intersections shows the city's photo-enforcement program is working.

"The reason we did this was to decrease the number of accidents," Strickland said. "The job is to ensure public safety."

But the cameras also generate revenue for the city. Since the city's program began in 2007, the city has collected more than \$6.5 million from red-light camera tickets, according to the city's budget office. The citation currently carries a \$124 fine.

A large part of that has gone toward paying Redflex because the company charges the city a flat fee per camera every month. In 2009, for example, the city's camera program brought in \$1.2 million. The city kept only \$515,240 after expenses, according to municipal court data.

Revenue from red-light cameras has also declined since the start of the program. While in 2008 the city collected \$1.6 million in gross revenue from red-light

camera tickets, revenue collected in 2012 totalled \$942,105, according to city budget data. Under the city's new five-year contract with Redflex — approved in late 2012 — \$585,000 of that revenue is now going toward paying the company each year.

Some find it distasteful that cities would make any amount of money off red-light cameras. State Rep. Chris Hurst, D-Enumclaw, who served as a police officer for 25 years before taking office in the 31st Legislative District, is among them.

“I think it's an insult against the law enforcement profession to take a public safety issue and make money off it,” Hurst said. “It's like crack cocaine — the city is addicted and can't get off it.”

Tim Eyman, a political activist in Washington, also disagrees with cities using cameras to catch red-light runners. He's helped lead initiatives in Bellingham, Longview, Redmond, Monroe and Wenatchee to get rid of traffic cameras.

“The voters don't want them, and ultimately you have to have public support in order for a policy to sustain itself,” Eyman said. “Instead of cameras, install speed indicator lights. They work even better.”

Richmond said the revenue from the red-light cameras goes to the city's traffic safety and engineering fund, which helps pay the salaries of traffic enforcement officers and traffic safety improvements. But filling the city's coffers is not the primary objective, police officials say.

“It's undeniable that the cameras do produce a substantial amount of money, but our biggest thing is safety,” said Richmond.

In Tacoma, like many cities, red-light camera violations function like parking tickets and don't go on a person's driving record. Violators can view still pictures and video clips of the alleged violation online and have the option of paying the ticket or requesting a hearing to mitigate or contest the ticket.

A complete stop is required before turning right at a red light. Police officers review videos of people making right turns to determine whether they stopped before making the turn.

Ultimately, red-light tickets won't be a problem if people obey the law, Richmond explained.

“There's a very simple opt-out program: Stop for the lights and go the speed limit,” Richmond said. “You'll never get one in the mail if you follow these rules.”