



Red-light cameras proposed in Pennsylvania: safety devices or hazards?

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Harrisburg and other cities around the state could soon get the green light for cameras at red lights.

A bill in the General Assembly would allow [cameras at red lights](#) in cities with more than 18,000 residents. Harrisburg, York, Lancaster and Reading would fit the bill. Philadelphia is the only city in Pennsylvania with red-light cameras.

The state Senate approved the bill last fall. State Rep. Richard Geist, R-Blair County, the chairman of the House Transportation Committee, said his committee could soon take up the bill.

Supporters say red-light cameras save lives. The premise is simple: The cameras are designed to discourage motorists from running red lights through fear of being photographed and fined. The bill would levy \$100 fines.

Critics, however, say the cameras make intersections more dangerous, because some motorists stop suddenly and get hit from behind. Skeptics say the cameras simply become cash cows for city governments — and the private companies running the cameras.

A group of bicycle enthusiasts gathered on the Capitol steps Tuesday to urge lawmakers to act. Surrounding the cyclists were 21 white-painted “ghost bikes,” each one memorializing a cyclist killed in 2010 on Pennsylvania roadways.

“Tragically, almost 40 percent of these deaths happen in intersections,” said Ross Willard, coordinator of [Ride of Silence Harrisburg](#), a bicycling safety advocacy group involved with the Capitol event Tuesday.

The cyclists wanted to draw lawmakers’ attention to the dangers posed to bicyclists on Pennsylvania roadways, particularly at intersections.

Expanding the red-light camera program would make roads safer for motorists and bicyclists, he said.

“Cameras change driver behavior. They reduce red-light running, reduce crashes and save lives,” Willard said.

Other areas around the country have installed cameras at intersections, including Los Angeles.

The program has brought in millions of dollars to Philadelphia and the state in the last five years, including \$7 million last year.

Geist said that to pass the state House, the bill needs to be about “saving people and not making money.”

“It should be self-sustaining, not a revenue source under local control,” he said. “That would leave open the possibility of abuse.”

Harrisburg will consider installing red-light cameras if the legislation becomes law, said Robert Philbin, a spokesman for Mayor Linda Thompson.

“It has potential in the city,” he said. It would be analyzed to see how it fits in with the mayor’s crime prevention program. That program uses grant funds to install cameras in areas of the city for crime reduction and assistance to police in investigating crimes.

Richard Retting, a former researcher for the [Insurance Institute for Highway Safety](#), said the introduction of red-light cameras at Philadelphia intersections, along with the lengthening of yellow lights, has curtailed violations by 90 percent or more.

A national survey by the institute found that cities with red-light cameras had a 24 percent reduction in fatal crashes involving red-light running.

But two cities in the study, Bakersfield, Calif., and Raleigh, N.C., saw increases in the number of fatal crashes after cameras went up.

Critics of red-light camera programs in Philadelphia and other cities have said that local governments use them as revenue tools rather than solely as instruments to improve public safety.

John Bowman, a spokesman for the National Motorists Association, said his group opposes the red-light cameras on principle.

“Red-light cameras are about producing revenue, not about safety,” he said. “There are better and easier ways to improve safety.”

Bowman pointed to other methods to improve safety, such as lengthening yellow light timers.

The cameras also generate concerns for the due-process rights of drivers, Bowman and other critics have said. In the case of violations, he said drivers would have little opportunity to defend themselves from the \$100 fine.

Willard asserts that Philadelphia’s safety camera program has had a positive impact on road safety.

He said, “As a cyclist from Harrisburg, why shouldn’t I experience this benefit?”

http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/index.ssf/2012/06/red-light_cameras_proposed_in.html

The New York Times

Traffic Cameras Draw More Scrutiny by States

By EMMARIE HUETTEMAN APRIL 1, 2013

WASHINGTON — The sudden flash lit up Christian Sevier’s Honda Civic as he drove on New York Avenue here. But it would take a few weeks before the \$150 speeding ticket in his mailbox explained what had happened.

He had triggered one of Washington’s traffic cameras, an increasingly common enforcement tool that snapped a photo of his car when it recognized he was speeding. A Freedom of Information Act inquiry by AAA revealed that a single speed camera along that busy thoroughfare had brought in more than \$11 million in just two years.

Although Mr. Sevier, 30, uses his car only a few times a week, he has received two more tickets since that first infraction.

“I almost see them as a tax on any citizen in Washington, D.C., who has a car,” he said.

Traffic cameras have spread to 582 communities nationwide to catch those who speed, run red lights or commit other violations. As their use has spread, lawmakers in states that have allowed cities to make decisions about photo enforcement are starting to get involved.

The Governors Highway Safety Association reports that 29 states have no state laws about speed cameras, though that does not mean there are no speed cameras in those states. In Iowa, for instance, seven cities operate speed cameras and another seven use red light cameras, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, a research organization financed by auto insurers and associations.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 66 bills related to photo enforcement have been presented nationwide so far in 2013. A few would approve the cameras, citing their safety advantages. Proposals in Arizona, Florida, Iowa and several other states would ban the cameras, joining the 12 states that prohibit speed cameras and the 9 that block red light cameras.

Critics of photo enforcement often paint a picture of government overreach. Though drivers can appeal their tickets, some claim the cameras violate the constitutional right to face their accuser. Others say they are an invasion of privacy.

Many contend that local governments — as well as the companies that manufacture and maintain the equipment, some in exchange for a percentage of the revenue rather than a flat fee — are more interested in money than in safety, pointing to studies indicating that the cameras may actually cause accidents.

Resentment has been building in Washington since 2010, when the mayor at the time, Adrian M. Fenty, raised traffic fines as part of his efforts to balance the budget. The fine for driving 11 to 15 miles per hour over the speed limit went up to \$125 from \$50, for instance.

“He was very clever and assiduous about squeezing out items that weren’t technically taxes that he could use for revenue,” said Mary M. Cheh, a district councilwoman.

In November, as the City Council held hearings on traffic enforcement, Mayor Vincent C. Gray lowered the fines, saying the changes would make penalties fairer for those with less serious infractions.

Supporters of photo enforcement point to growing evidence suggesting that traffic cameras curb violations and decrease the number of fatal accidents. One recent study by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reported a significant decline in red-light running not only at intersections with cameras a year after the police had started ticketing there, but also at nearby intersections without cameras.

When asked about efforts to strike down a Florida law permitting traffic cameras, Melissa Wandall, president of the National Coalition for Safer Roads, said a recent survey showed that 56 percent of Florida communities that responded reported fewer crashes at intersections with cameras.

On a fall evening in 2003, when a driver ran a red light and slammed into the car carrying Ms. Wandall’s husband, killing him instantly, she stood at the crash site, nine months pregnant, and vowed to find meaning in the tragedy.

Ms. Wandall, 45, worked with her congressman on the Florida law authorizing red light cameras, which bore her husband’s name when the governor signed the legislation, the Mark Wandall Traffic Safety Program, in 2010. A portion of each ticket goes to medical centers.

“The program is doing so many great things that I don’t see how they can get rid of them,” she said.

Anne T. McCartt, an official at the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, said that while traffic cameras are a contentious issue, opposition is not as strong as some claim. An institute study of drivers in 14 cities with red light cameras — including Phoenix, Chicago and Raleigh, N.C. — found that two-thirds supported their use.

“I think there is a vocal minority in these communities that focus a lot of attention on this issue,” Ms. McCartt said.

In Washington, officials plan to add to the district’s current 90 traffic cameras. Since it started using speed cameras in 2001, Washington has had a 73 percent decrease in traffic deaths, said Gwendolyn Crump, a police spokeswoman.

And while photo enforcement brings in a lot of money — \$21.2 million in February — Ms. Cheh said revenue was not the point.

“I know citizens sometimes don’t believe this,” she said. “I don’t want your money. I want you to stop speeding.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/02/us/traffic-cameras-draw-more-scrutiny-by-states.html>