Red Light Cameras in the City of Albany

Lessons from Elsewhere and Recommendations

Albany Common Council
Public Safety Committee
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Overview

On July 22, 2014, the City of Albany received State authorization to install traffic signal photo-monitoring devices (otherwise known as red light cameras) at up to 20 intersections as part of a pilot program expiring on August 21, 2019. AAA New York State has prepared this document in order to assist City officials and Councilmembers who will decide whether and how to implement such a program.

In New York State, five municipalities currently operate red light cameras: New York City, Nassau County, Suffolk County, Yonkers, and Rochester. These programs were all reauthorized by the state legislature and the Governor in the previous legislative session, and provide reasons for both optimism and caution regarding red light cameras.

Red light running is dangerous behavior that merits a significant deterrent. Consequently, AAA supports properly administered red light camera programs that are transparent, fair, thorough, and effective. Some New York municipalities have reported a drop in injuries and crashes at red light camera intersections. Unfortunately, the lack of transparency surrounding many programs fuels public suspicion that automated enforcement is being used primarily for revenue generation.

Albany has an opportunity to learn from the mistakes of others and act to avoid these errors. In particular, Albany can be the first municipality in the state to:

- Rededicate all revenue from automated enforcement into traffic safety measures
- Analyze “control” intersections in the state-mandated report
- Disclose the report on the City’s website
- Institute a statute of limitations on red light camera violations
- Create a photo enforcement oversight committee

Additionally, Albany should abide by additional policies that enhance traffic safety:

- Conduct an extensive education campaign before operating red light cameras
- Choose intersections with a history of side-impact crashes
- Consider engineering and educational measures before installing a red light camera
- Place warning signs at selected entrances to the City and in advance of each camera intersection
- Remove cameras from intersections where safety has not improved or has worsened

Lastly, Albany can act to safeguard the rights of drivers:

- Mandate the inclusion of video footage in any citation
- Allow pleas of not-guilty by mail
- Ensure hearings are adversarial and in front of an impartial judge
- Provide reasonable enforcement tolerances so that flagrant, not nominal, infractions are targeted

This document will summarize New York State’s experience with red light cameras, results of academic studies, and controversies from around the country. It will conclude with an extensive – though not necessarily exhaustive – list of recommendations.
Academic Research

Red light running is a major problem throughout New York State the nation. In the United States, 683 fatalities and 133,000 injuries occurred from red light running in 2012. To combat this epidemic, federal guidelines recommend a combination of engineering, education, and enforcement. Over 500 municipalities now include red light camera programs in their enforcement toolbox.

Much of the evidence suggests that red light cameras increase safety. Studies from the IIHS, Arizona, Texas, Oxnard (CA), and USA/Singapore/Australia assert as much. A Federal Highway Administration review states that cameras “decreased right-angle crashes and increased rear end ones…There was indeed a modest aggregate crash cost benefit of [red light camera] systems.”

Studies from Seattle, Florida, and the National Cooperative Highway Research Program believe there are positive but not conclusive signs. A Virginia report states that “cameras are associated with an increase in rear-end crashes and a decrease in red light running crashes…there is significant variation by intersection and by jurisdiction…These results cannot be used to justify the widespread installation of cameras because they are not universally effective. These results also cannot be used to justify the abolition of cameras, as they have had a positive impact at some intersections and in some jurisdictions.”

Analyses from Winnipeg, Greensboro (NC), Florida, and Louisiana argue that red light cameras do not increase safety. The latter states that “despite reducing the number of cars entering this intersection during a red light, [red light cameras] do not seem to prevent traffic collisions at this monitored intersection. Alternative means of injury prevention must be investigated.”

Results from New York State

Red light camera programs across New York have been operated with varying degrees of effectiveness:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NYC</th>
<th>Nassau</th>
<th>Suffolk</th>
<th>Yonkers</th>
<th>Rochester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violations</td>
<td>583,778</td>
<td>335,929</td>
<td>208,648</td>
<td>95,123</td>
<td>90,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenue</td>
<td>$35.7 million</td>
<td>$26.1 million</td>
<td>$9.8 million</td>
<td>$4.8 million</td>
<td>$2.5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% to vendor</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Crashes</td>
<td>Not in report</td>
<td>-29%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
<td>+8%</td>
<td>-38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side-impact</td>
<td>Not in report</td>
<td>-26%</td>
<td>-28%</td>
<td>-23%</td>
<td>-35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rear-end</td>
<td>Not in report</td>
<td>-39%</td>
<td>+20%</td>
<td>+106%</td>
<td>-38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injuries</td>
<td>-33%</td>
<td>-27%</td>
<td>-11%</td>
<td>+46%</td>
<td>-81%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The programs also had varying degrees of transparency and fairness. Though it is not perfect, Nassau County’s red light camera program has been the exemplar of the programs in New York State. Nassau was transparent with regard to violation review, adjudication, and evaluation.

Suffolk County’s program was slightly less transparent and less effective than Nassau’s. County engineering officials made themselves accessible, but AAA New York State was forced to FOIL the state-mandated report and has yet to obtain the most recent copy, which was already one year late.

New York City was the first municipality to operate red light cameras in the nation, but has been insufficiently transparent and failed to follow state reporting requirements by omitting a list of locations.
from its annual report. Disappointingly, only one year of data has been released per camera, though some cameras have up to twenty years of statistics available.

Rochester’s program shows signs of promise, but has only released the most recent set of data to the media, not AAA New York State. Its initial report failed to follow state reporting requirements by omitting violation, financial, and adjudication statistics.

Yonkers was not transparent with its data, and only released its state-mandated 2013 report after an AAA New York State assessment criticized its transparency. In previous reports, it has used misleading graphs, and continues to cite a drop in violations as evidence of the program’s success, despite AAA’s protests that injuries have actually increased and the jury is unequivocally still out.

**Controversies**

Red light camera skeptics can point to numerous controversies that indicate unethical operation.

- In Rochester, one intersection was proven to have insufficient amber signals that unjustly increased the number of violations; similar allegations have surfaced across the country.
- In Clermont, Florida, 88% of violations were for right turns on red, not especially dangerous behavior.
- In Chicago, a newspaper investigation into the red light camera data unearthed some unexplained spikes in tickets, an issue that has yet to be resolved.
- A recent audit by the Inspector General of the District of Columbia criticized the lack of due process in automated enforcement cases.
- The “Keep Florida Roads Safe” organization and the “Traffic Safety Coalition” – both surreptitiously funded by red light camera vendors – have lobbied to prohibit a referendum on red light cameras in Brooksville (FL) and to maintain red light cameras in New Jersey, respectively.
- Camera vendor Redflex was dropped from its contract with Chicago after evidence of bribery came to light, after which many Redflex executives resigned, and new allegations have tied the company to bribery in 13 other states - including California, based on a recent report.

**AAA New York State’s Position**

The preponderance of the evidence leads to four primary conclusions:

- Red light cameras have the potential to reduce the deadliest crashes.
- The success of red light cameras varies significantly across jurisdictions and intersections.
- The most effective red light camera programs are accompanied by education (i.e. photo-enforced signs) and engineering (i.e. lengthening amber times or using an “all-red” phase).
- Red light cameras are susceptible to misuse and abuse.

These four conclusions form the basis of AAA New York State’s position on red light cameras:

**AAA New York State supports red light camera programs that are preceded by and supplemented with engineering measures, educational campaigns, and traditional law enforcement, provided that the programs operate fairly, revenue is reinvested into safety measures, and a thorough evaluation of such programs is regularly conducted and disclosed to the public.**
AAA New York State has prepared an extensive, but not necessarily exhaustive, list of recommendations to municipalities considering red light camera programs. These recommendations can help guide Albany officials toward a program that encompasses five important characteristics: thoroughness, transparency, fairness, effectiveness, and integrity. The recommendations have been divided into five categories: procurement, preparation, operation, adjudication, and evaluation. A summary is presented here:

- **Procurement**
  - Explore all options for vendor and contract structure
  - Select red light camera intersections, not outsource responsibility to vendor representatives
  - Pay the vendor a flat fee, not a per-citation fee
  - Maintain control over camera operations
  - Reinvest money into safety measures

- **Preparation**
  - Select sites with a history of frequent side-impact crashes and few rear-end crashes
  - Grant the community input into intersection selection
  - Ensure traffic signals comply with all applicable engineering principles and ITE standards including minimum yellow light intervals
  - Determine who has responsibility for the road
  - Consider alternative engineering measures prior to camera installation
  - Conduct a public education campaign about the dangers of red light running

- **Operation**
  - Have trained law enforcement officials approve violations
  - Provide reasonable enforcement tolerances so that flagrant, not nominal, infractions are targeted
  - Protect privacy rights of drivers
  - Calibrate the cameras in-person
  - Place warning signs at selected City entrances and in advance of camera intersections
  - Consider placing “right on red after full stop” warning signs at intersections where a large proportion of violations are for turning right on red without coming to a complete stop
  - Institute a warning period so that any hiccups can be sorted out

- **Adjudication**
  - Mandate the inclusion of video footage in any citation
  - Allow pleas of not-guilty by mail
  - Ensure hearings are adversarial and in front of an impartial judge
  - Institute a statute of limitations on red light camera violations

- **Evaluation**
  - Include crash statistics for each intersection in the state-mandated annual report
  - Analyze “control” intersections that do not have cameras
  - Submit reports in a timely fashion
  - Create a photo enforcement oversight committee
  - Place reports on the City website
  - Remove cameras from intersections where safety has not improved or has worsened
Appendix A – Sources

13 Ibid.