

By [Gregory Cornfield](#) / March 15, 2017

New light shed on traffic camera enforcement

West Hollywood installs new cameras to improve safety

Drivers in Los Angeles County have become accustomed to motorists flying through intersections on Friday afternoons to “beat the light,” and it has become commonplace to see a line of three to four cars creep forward from the left turn lane after the light turns yellow.

photo

Despite a red light, a van continues to make a left from Sixth Street, while the light for the cars on Wilton Avenue already turned green.

(photo by Gregory Cornfield)

These habits help make the county one of the most dangerous places for motorists and pedestrians in the country. Changing those behaviors could lead to significant improvements toward safer streets. However, jurisdictions in the county are using differing techniques to do so.

The city of West Hollywood this week started using new red-light photo technology at four existing photo-enforced intersections. The new digital cameras will record vehicles that run red lights from the front and the rear with video and photos. They replaced the previously installed cameras that only took photos of the front of vehicles.

According to a news release from West Hollywood, automated red-light cameras have “proven to be an effective tool in reducing collisions caused by red-light violations,” but that is starkly different than how the city of Los Angeles views the red light camera technology.

For years, Los Angeles relied on cameras to catch drivers who run red lights as a way to deter poor driving habits. But studies proved they were not effective in curbing accidents as much as they were in collecting revenue from motorists. In 2009, media reports found several camera-enforced intersections in Los Angeles did not have reduced collision rates. Instead, some intersections had as many as three times the number of accidents than before the cameras were installed. Critics of the technology say some drivers see the camera flash or the light turn yellow and slam on their brakes to avoid an expensive ticket, leading to more rear-end collisions.

A 2010 audit by the city controller’s office revealed the city was losing more than \$1 million per year on the red light camera program, and the city discontinued the program shortly after.

The failures of the red light camera strategies led Assemblyman Matthew Harper (R-Huntington Beach) to introduce legislation in 2015 to prohibit the installation of red light cameras in the state, though the bill failed to gain support. Harper did point out, however, that there were 110 red light camera programs in the state at one time and nearly 80 jurisdictions have since closed their programs.

Jay Beeber, executive director for Safer Streets L.A., said those programs penalized people for rolling stops on right turns and left turns on yellow lights, which are not the types of habits that cause the serious accidents that people think of when talking about red light running. The most severe accidents are caused by impairment, distraction and fatigue, which red light cameras cannot prevent. However, Beeber pointed to West Hollywood's program, which only tickets drivers moving straight through red lights, which is "what [the cameras] were intended to do."

"It was intended for people blowing through red lights straight through," he said. "No one anticipated that most violations would be for turning lanes."

Eric Millsap, transportation engineering technician for the city of West Hollywood, confirmed that, as of now, rolling right turns will not face penalties. He also said the new cameras are part of an ongoing effort, and that the city is collecting data for more pedestrian safety measures.

Beeber is a community advocate who helped convince the city of Los Angeles to get rid of the red light camera program, and he has studied other jurisdictions throughout the state.

He explained that the problem with red light cameras is that other proponents "have never really explained the mechanism by which they work to reduce accidents."

He explained that camera supporters claim that by putting up ticketing cameras, drivers will "adjust their behavior" or "drive more carefully" around the cameras, making the intersections safer. He said the cameras can scare some people from "pushing" the yellow light to make it through the intersection before the light turns red, but that does not prove it helps reduce collisions.

"You'd have to show that the people pushing the yellow are actually causing the collision," he said. "The majority of the people being ticketed are for a slow rolling right turn or they're a fraction of a second late entering the intersection. I would challenge [proponents] to really show a direct link. And what types of violations they stopped, and that those violations would have caused collisions."

Beeber emphasized that his concerns with the program should not be taken as encouragement to rush through intersections or drive carelessly. More so, he objects to the way the technology is used.

He found that infractions such as rolling right turns lead to 330 collisions per year in California – a state in which 335 billion miles of streets are traveled each year. That makes up approximately .075 percent of all collisions in the state each year.

Since those infractions are not the cause of most accidents, he said the red light camera programs become a waste of time and money “in comparison to the other things we can do.”

Thanks in part to Beeber’s advocacy, many transportation departments in California now rely on other measures, such as longer yellow lights or longer intervals when all lights are red. Indeed, West Hollywood has seen significant improvements with upgrades to signal timing.

Beeber said extending yellow light times to correlate with the actual speed of traffic near intersections shows to be much more effective in reducing collisions and running red lights.

In Beverly Hills, red light cameras have worked to improve safety and deter violations, according to Lt. Renato Moreno, with the Beverly Hills Police Department. The city installed the cameras nearly 20 years ago, and they are located at 17 traffic “approaches,” meaning multiple cameras at some intersections regulate traffic approaching from different directions.

“The program, when we first started it, was quite successful. We saw a decline [in drivers running red lights] at intersections where they were implemented,” Moreno said in February. “When people become aware of a camera being there, they become better educated and become safer in general. At some point, everyone knows it’s there and they become safer.”

Beeber said Beverly Hills does a good job running their program in “the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law,” in contrast to some jurisdictions that “abuse” the system.

The fine for running a red light is \$490, plus court fees. In 2016, 12,720 citations were issued by the red light cameras in Beverly Hills, according to statistics provided by the Beverly Hills Police Department.

“It’s a deterrent,” said Sgt. Gregg Mader, with the Beverly Hills Police Department. “It alters behavior not just at the intersection, but throughout the city.”

Beeber studied the city’s program and said violations decreased 65 percent overall with longer yellow light times. The intersection of Wilshire Boulevard and Whittier Drive saw an 85 percent decrease in one direction and a 78 percent decrease in the other direction.

“You can reduce red light running by doing proper engineering,” Beeber said.

On Jan. 26, Los Angeles revealed how it plans to achieve its own goals of reducing traffic-related accidents when Mayor Eric Garcetti and the Los Angeles Department of Transportation released the city's first Vision Zero Action Plan, which includes strategies they hope will reverse the deadly trends. But it did not include exploring the installation of red light cameras in the city until 2025.

Cameras with radar to detect drivers traveling faster than the posted speed limit may soon take the place of the red light cameras in the city of Los Angeles. According to the Vision Zero Action Plan, vehicle speed is a fundamental predictor of crash survival. A pedestrian's chances of survival after being hit by a vehicle are increased from 10 percent to 80 percent if the driver is traveling at 20 miles per hour instead of 40 miles per hour.

Millsap, the transportation engineer in West Hollywood, said he has not seen rear-end accidents increase since cameras were installed, and that the city is making less money than it is spending.

A 30-day warning period for red light photo enforcement in West Hollywood started on Monday and will continue through Tuesday, April 11. During this period, warning notices will be mailed to registered owners of vehicles who were photographed committing red-light violations. After the 30-day warning period passes, notices of violation will be issued by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. People who receive citations will be able to view photos and video of the violation on a password-protected website.

The county, however, does not report unpaid tickets to the Department of Motor Vehicles, and there is no requirement to appear in court, according to Beeber and several media sites. (Calls to the Superior Court were not returned by press time.) If drivers do not pay their red light camera tickets, the county does not penalize recipients' credit report, and it will not affect insurance rates.

"Quite frankly, people get these tickets inadvertently," Beeber said. "Not most people who are flagrant violators or scofflaws. Simply getting the ticket is often enough to chasten them to change their behavior."

Red-light enforcement will be conducted at eight intersections in West Hollywood which have a history of red-light-based violations, according to the city. Every intersection approach monitored by cameras is marked with a sign to notify traffic that the intersection is being monitored.

Estevan Montemayor, chairman of the West Hollywood Public Safety Commission, said he is not in favor of continuing the program until the commission can learn more from the city. On Tuesday, he said the transportation staff at city hall generally scheduled such matters to be considered by the commission before being approved, but this time they did not. He said the Public Safety Commission asked in the future that they schedule them to be considered by the commission. And he said the matter of the new red light cameras will now be scheduled for the commission's next meeting.

“Many cities are ending their [red light camera ticket] program, so I’d love to hear more data, more of a reasoning and analysis,” he said.

The city of West Hollywood previously used red-light photo enforcement cameras at 24 traffic approaches at eight intersections. Traffic engineering analysis determined the other 16 intersection approaches no longer exhibit high instances of red light violations.

For information, contact the city of West Hollywood’s Department of Public Works at (323)848-6375.

1 Comment



Henry Willson
Mar 16, 2017

You can ignore these tickets! See the fifth-to-last paragraph of today’s article, and if you still have doubts, do a search on red light camera no consequence. (The ability to ignore red light camera tickets is only inside LA County, and only if you do not contact the court about the ticket.)

Today’s article mentions speed cameras, but doesn’t mention that there’s a bill in the legislature, right now, to permit them in California. It is AB 342, and IMHO it is just about extracting money from motorists – a speed tax. The automated speeding tickets won’t carry points, so multiple tickets won’t deter unsafe motorists, if they have money. They’ll just write a check, and keep on speeding down the street in front of your house. And, there’s another bill that will be pickpocketing you, SB 1, which will raise gas tax and registration. May I suggest that we all need to call our legislators in Sacramento.

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