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Whittier drops photo red-light enforcement program

By Mike Sprague Staff Writer

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WHITTIER - The city has scrapped its photo red-light enforcement program, citing a decline in revenue and no improvement in traffic safety.

The cameras at the Mulberry Drive and Greenleaf Avenue and Painter Avenue and Lambert Road intersections were removed in November when the city's contract with Nestor Traffic Systems expired, said Whittier interim police Chief Jeff Piper.

"Ideally, (the cameras) would have extinguished the unwanted behavior," said Nancy Mendez, assistant city manager.

"Initially, the red-light program did change behaviors because it did lessen the number of red-light violations but over the long term it didn't appear to lessen the number of injury accidents," Mendez said.

And the city began losing money as the result of a change in state law prohibiting cities and counties from collecting money based on the number of citations or actual proceeds.

The 2004 law didn't apply to existing contracts and thus wasn't a problem for Whittier until the contract was renewed in 2009, Piper said.

Originally, the company was to bill the city \$48 for each violation, with the city keeping about \$100 of the fine and the state getting the rest.

But with the new law, the city would have had to pay a flat fee to Nestor and that wouldn't have been equal to the actual fines Whittier would receive, Piper said.

In addition, traffic statistics showed that the two intersections were no more safe than before the photo-radar systems were installed in early 2004, he said.

Most of the citations were for turning right on a red light, Piper said.

Whittier was one of the 100 of more than 400 cities in California that had red-light photo radar programs, said Hamid Bahadori, manager of transportation policy for the Automobile Club of Southern California.

Cities in San Diego County were among the first to adopt such programs, beginning about 12 years ago, Bahadori said.

But once the 2004 bill was adopted to limit revenue, the surge in cities adding photo-radar ceased, he said.

There also were questions about its effectiveness, Bahadori said.

For example, when the city of San Diego increased the time on the yellow light by about half a second, the number of tickets dropped from 3,000 to 500 annually, he said.

Whittier isn't the only city that has dropped these types of programs, Bahadori said. For example, Loma Linda stopped theirs Friday and Anaheim voters in November amended their charter to ban red-light cameras or other automated systems.

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