Dallas' red light cameras may face changes as revenue estimate drops

Dallas' system works too well, eating into revenues, fueling possible changes

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By DAVE LEVINTHAL / The Dallas Morning News
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Dallas City Hall has idled more than one-fourth of the 62 cameras that monitor busy intersections because many of them are failing to generate enough red-light-running fines to justify their operational costs, according to city documents.

Initial gross revenue estimates for the red light camera system during Dallas' 2007-08 fiscal year were $14.8 million, according to city records. The latest estimate? About $6.2 million. City Manager Mary Suhm on Friday estimated net revenue will fall $4.1 million under initial estimates.

That leaves Dallas government with a conundrum. Its red-light camera system has been an effective deterrent to motorists running red lights — some monitored intersections have experienced a more than 50 percent reduction. But decreased revenue from red light-running violations means significantly less revenue to maintain the camera program and otherwise fuel the city’s general fund.

Exacerbating the drain is a new state law requiring that municipalities send half of their net red-light-running camera revenue to Austin and post signs alerting drivers of upcoming camera installations. Also, city records indicate Dallas has lengthened yellow-light intervals on 12 of its 62 monitored traffic signals, giving motorists more time to beat a red light.

City transportation officials say they're brainstorming potential changes to the red-light camera program, which is financed by the general fund, before a planned update to the City Council next month on the program's status.

"We did not anticipate having such success so early with the number of people not running red lights," said Zaida Basora, Dallas' assistant director of public works and transportation. "If you have success in safety, you don't have a lot of success in revenue. The other side is the people will go back to what they were doing before without the cameras."

Curtailing expansion?

Ms. Basora says one likely recommendation to the council is scaling back Dallas' plans to expand the red-light system to 100 cameras.

The council in September voted to expand its camera vendor contract with Dallas-based Affiliated Computer Services, from five years and $13.3 million to seven years and $29.1 million, in order to install the additional cameras.

Initial plans envisioned most of the additional cameras operating by spring. Ms. Basora said installing fewer cameras would probably be more cost-effective.

Another idea staff may recommend to council members is idling cameras on a rotating basis, which the city already has begun doing, or operating them at different intersections where red-light running is more habitual.

In the first case, cameras will remain perched above the intersections they monitor but won't snap pictures of red-light runners, and therefore, won't generate $75 civil citations, which the city mails to the offending vehicles' owners.
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Ms. Basora noted, however, that most motorists won't realize this and behave as if the cameras are operational.

Dallas pays ACS a guaranteed $3,799 per month for each operational camera, and just a fraction of that to maintain inoperative cameras.

Safety vs. money

The results of Dallas' 2-year-old red-light camera system are mixed blessings for City Hall, Mayor Tom Leppert said.

"The good news is it's having the effect everyone in this community wants: fewer red lights being run. The goal was not to make money on this," Mr. Leppert said. "But these are numbers and realities we'll have to deal with."

The mayor added that under no circumstances does he expect a decrease in red-light camera revenue to affect the city's public safety budget, although the overall budget may not enjoy as much revenue, perhaps resulting in the city streamlining other items.

Council member Angela Hunt, long skeptical of the reasoning behind such camera systems, says she's not surprised Dallas is faced with altering its efforts to reduce red-light running.

"The idea of the red-light cameras is that they'll be used as a revenue generator instead of being implemented for public safety purposes. It's imperative that the council review this program, especially when the results don't align with the initial performance projections," Ms. Hunt said.

She cited national statistics suggesting that the cameras increase rear-end collisions.

Dallas officials haven't yet determined if such crashes, or crashes in general, have increased or decreased significantly because of red-light cameras.

But in Lubbock, the City Council voted 4-3 last month to terminate its red-light camera system, in part because of an increase in rear-end crashes.

Meanwhile, state Rep. Carl Isett, R-Lubbock, plans to introduce legislation next session banning red-light cameras statewide — a measure that failed last session.

Finding right number

Jim Baxter, president of the National Motorists Association, which opposes red-light camera systems, says he suspects Dallas' system will either meet its demise, or be noticeably scaled back.

"They're in between a rock and a hard place, and when the money goes away, the cameras go away," Mr. Baxter said. "Probably the only way they can sustain it is to raise the violation rates, despite all the protestation that this is about safety and not about revenue."

Dallas' red-light camera system will still generate revenue, Ms. Basora said, "but it won't be considerable."

Mayor Pro Tem Elba Garcia said Dallas' red-light cameras should remain because they're a proven tool in reducing red-light running. That's reason enough to keep them, she said.

"The golden question is how many cameras do we need? We'll have to look at the numbers carefully," Dr. Garcia said. "But for me, this has always been about safety, has always been about awareness. We did not do this for the money."
Sounding Off: Red-light cameras and red ink

Question: What should cities do if the revenue from red-light cameras is not enough to pay for their continued use?

12:00 AM CDT on Saturday, March 22, 2008

Not enough revenue for the red-light cameras, you say? Then jack up the cost of a ticket for a violation!

Leeanne Hay, Plano

It's the ultimate insult to the citizenry that our esteemed leaders would even consider lack of revenue as a legitimate reason to discontinue the red-light cameras. Don't those idiots realize making intersections safer is all that counts? Only in Texas would money be an issue when lives can be saved. There should be a public riot if the cameras are removed.

David B. Seizer, Frisco

Cities should remove the red-light cameras. Although they are supposed to increase safety, instead they cause people to slam on their brakes or gun it to get through the intersection quickly.

Nancy Price, Wylie

If the overall goal is reduced red-light running, which translates into fewer accidents, that should be reflected in a decrease in overall costs due to fewer accidents to investigate, less time lost from backed-up traffic, and fewer lives lost. If that isn't reason enough to keep the cameras, I don't know what is.

Shelby Chesnut, Plano

They should take the cameras down and scrap them. Surely you can use the scrap to help with construction projects. I never thought I would say this about red lights, but recycle.

Ronald Paris, McKinney

I think the city should get rid of them. I'm frustrated at the amount of money the government spends that goes to waste, and this is a good example. Why continue to pay for something that isn't cost-effective? We've got infrastructure that needs repair or replacing, roads that tear your car up, etc.

Wanda Meyers, Plano

Use video enforcement on the HOV lanes on the local highways. They'll be rolling in fines like pigs in stink.

Stephen D. Spotswood, Plano

The police power is a legitimate exercise of government authority. We wouldn't eliminate the police force or the fire department because they do not bring in sufficient revenue to pay for themselves. Why should the standard for cameras be different?

Evy Davis, Plano

We the people lost some basic civil rights when this law was enacted. Government shouldn't be all about the money.
the cameras aren't necessary for our safety, get rid of them before they think of more sinister uses for them.

Gary Edwards, Plano

Red-light cameras should be used sparingly and only in areas where running red lights has caused accidents. The cost of these cameras should be considered an investment in public safety with any shortage of revenue versus cost provided by taxpayer funds.

Roy Serpa, Fairview

The cameras are working so well to stop violators (and the resulting danger to life and property) that fines are not being generated as projected by city engineers. This is not a problem. It is a fantastic success, and if the city government truly wants to preserve life and property, it will bite the financial bullet and continue to protect and serve its citizens through its red-light camera program.

Clint Ellison, Plano

Sign Up

These responses are from readers who have asked to receive the weekly Sounding Off question. To be added to the e-mail list, send your name, address and phone number to ecopinions@dallasnews.com.

Voices: The above residents are regular contributors to this forum. Jeff Fortney Sr.

Plano financial services

An effective public safety tool should not be questioned because it isn't making money. In fact, it should be a part of the budget, because, unlike other areas of our budgets, this works.

Ruchi Minocha

Plano homemaker

The decrease in revenue from the red-light cameras is proof enough of their effectiveness and increased safety. Scrapping the program should not be an option. Since inoperative cameras cost just a fraction of the operational cameras, running the existing cameras on a planned schedule should help bring the cost down without compromising safety.

Darrin

Swartz-Larson

McKinney federal worker

It sounds like the cameras have been a strong deterrent in Dallas, so if they were as successful in McKinney, I'd recommend that the city start aiming them at the cars that block traffic by dropping off able-bodied people directly in front of stores. (Park and walk like the rest of us!)

Diane Berry

Seventh-grade teacher, Faubion Middle School, McKinney

The purpose of a camera is to catch offenders and protect others from them, not fund a department's treasury. If an intersection warrants having a security camera by catching many offenders, then keep it.

Laurie Dodic
Steinberg

Highland Park full-time mother and volunteer

I like the idea of rotating which cameras are on and which are off, and not letting motorists know. Then if everyone who was caught running a red light had to attend a four-hour motor safety class in addition to a fine, we could eventually take down the cameras. I think the hassle would then become the deterrent.
Sunday letters: Red-light cameras

12:00 AM CDT on Sunday, March 23, 2008

red-light cameras

Cameras should be mobile

Re: "A slow sign for red-light cameras — Dallas' system has worked too well, eating into revenues," Saturday news story.

Once it's known there are cameras at the intersection, there will be no more (or fewer) citations. What Dallas and other cities have done wrong is to permanently install the cameras. If they were made to be mobile, you could have them all over town at various locations, move them and bring them back when I would least expect it. More citations mean more revenue.

Milton Sander, Dallas

Devices are dangerous

I believe red-light cameras are causing more accidents. Many drivers are now slowing down to make sure to stop if the light turns yellow. When I stop for a yellow light so that I won't possibly get a ticket, the person behind me slams on his brakes and frequently, through the horn or through one of his digits, lets me know that he's not happy.

I have multiple concerns regarding the system. You don't get to face your accuser, and the ticket may arrive in the mail several weeks later. Also, since many drivers are slowing down, revenue is down and not even paying for the system. I suggest that the municipalities hire more traffic enforcement police.

Don Webb, Plano

Pitch in to balance the budget

Calling all cars! The city of Dallas needs your help. Due to decreased revenue from fewer red-light runners than expected, the city of Dallas would like for you to run those pesky red lights where revenue-generating cameras are located.

Please note: Only run those pesky red lights when it is absolutely safe to do so. No exceptions – we don't want anyone to get hurt, but we need to keep the city budget balanced. Thank you for your contribution and hopefully we'll see you in court.

Yours truly,

The city of Dallas

Gregg Fussell, Dallas

My solution is easy, cheap

City Council member Angela Hunt has it right, as usual. The red-light cameras are all about revenue, not safety. If safety is the issue, here is a cheap solution.
Increase the guard interval between the red light and the opposing green light. My observation has been that less than a second elapses between the time a light turns red and the other direction turns green.

If this time was increased to one full minute, all "red-light running" accidents would be eliminated. Of course, having all four directions of traffic stopped for a full minute would be ridiculous, but adding a little more time, say up to four seconds, would greatly reduce the number of accidents.

This solution can be universally applied, not just to selected intersections, and would only cost the planning and implementation time of the city's traffic engineers, and maybe 30 seconds is added to your trip across town.

George Fargo, Plano