

## **Cameras planned at Jeff stoplights**

**Enforcement aid has no cost for taxpayers**

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**By Kate Moran**

To catch motorists in the act of bolting through red lights, the Jefferson Parish Council plans to move forward Wednesday with an initiative to install cameras on traffic signals to record the license plates of offending vehicles.

Council Chairman John Young said the technology could reduce the frequency of side-impact collisions, potentially helping to bridle the cost of auto insurance premiums, which are among the highest in the country in southeast Louisiana.

At a time when Jefferson residents are absorbed with the rising crime rate, Young said the traffic cameras would also free up police to focus attention less on traffic enforcement and more on violent crime.

"We will not have to have manpower out there monitoring those intersections. Our law enforcement can be redeployed to crime fighting," he said.

Jefferson, along with the cities of Lafayette and Baton Rouge, is among the first in the state to explore using the traffic cameras. Peter Newkirk, director of public works in Baton Rouge, said his city is conducting tests of the equipment with two different companies, but he was optimistic about the possibilities for reducing accidents.

"From what we found in other cities, there is a reduction rate of about 40 percent of people who run red lights once this is implemented," he said.

A recent study by the Federal Highway Administration was more conservative about the deterrent effect of the cameras. The study found that cameras reduced side-impact collisions by 24.6 percent, but they also increased the frequency of rear-impact collisions by 15.7 percent as skittish motorists braked suddenly to avoid running red lights.

"People who run red lights tend to cause right-angle crashes, which are among the most severe of accidents because they tend to occur at high rates of speed," said Kevin Moore, Jefferson's traffic engineering supervisor.

Jefferson drew two bids for the contract to install traffic cameras at major intersections, and the council will choose a vendor on Wednesday. The bidders, American Traffic Solutions and Redflex Traffic Systems, would install the cameras at their own cost and recoup the money from traffic ticket proceeds.

The parish would still receive the largest cut of the traffic tickets, which help to finance the first and second parish courts, the district attorney's office and the indigent defender program at the state district court in Gretna. Young said there would be no out-of-pocket cost for taxpayers, because traffic scofflaws pay for the program through their own violations.

Although the cameras pay for themselves, Newkirk, of Baton Rouge, said they tend to generate less revenue over time as drivers become acclimated to slowing down at intersections.

Neither Jefferson nor Baton Rouge intends to trap motorists with hidden cameras. Both jurisdictions plan to erect signs well before intersections are wired to warn drivers that a digital image will be taken of their license plate if they hurtle through a red light.

The cameras, which have been widely used from North Carolina to California, have inflamed privacy concerns in some libertarian circles. To allay Big Brother fears, Jefferson plans to use cameras that capture only the rear of the vehicle and the license plate, not the front of the car, which would show who was riding as a passenger.

Photographing the vehicle only from the rear does have one downside: The owner will be penalized with a traffic ticket even if he was not the one driving the car. Young said the same penalty would befall the owner of a car that received a parking ticket.

"The presumption is, if it's your car, you were driving it," Young said, adding that the tickets are a civil violation, not a criminal one.

Moore said the traffic department had not yet determined which intersections would be rigged with the red-light cameras. The council asked potential vendors to install the technology at 10 major intersections, but Moore said the total might be more or less, depending on where the company believes it can make a profit.

While the money-making potential of the cameras is what motivates the companies, Moore said, the parish is not pursuing the technology to generate revenue.

"From our perspective, this is not about making money at all. This is about safety," he said.

Alan Gandolfi, director of the council's Office of Research and Budget, said the parish would negotiate the cost of the traffic tickets with the vendor the council selects on Wednesday. The company would receive a fee, but the district attorney and other agencies that benefit from ticket revenue would also collect a share.

"We're trying to keep those entities whole without making the tickets more onerous on the general public than they are under the current system," Gandolfi said.

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