

Ticket's in the mail: Red-light cameras questioned

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Richard Tarlton stands near a red light camera at the intersection where he got a traffic ticket, Tuesday, Jan. 27, 2009, in Clive, Iowa. As more cities sign up and others invest their profits into more cameras, the companies that operate the cameras expect increased revenue for years to come. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

(AP) -- Minutes after Neel Manglik illegally turned right on a red light in the Des Moines suburb of Clive, a video popped up on a computer at an office park outside Scottsdale, Ariz.

The \$75 citation arrived in the mail weeks later, making Manglik one of the millions of Americans ticketed as part of a growing industry that is making handsome profits for companies that operate video cameras at busy intersections throughout the nation.

As more cities sign up and others invest their profits into more cameras, those companies expect increased revenue for years to come.

What's less clear is whether the cameras improve safety. While studies show fewer T-bone crashes at lights with cameras and fewer drivers running red lights, the number of rear-end crashes increases.

Aaron Quinn, spokesman for the Wisconsin-based National Motorists Association, said there are cheaper safety alternatives to red-light cameras, including lengthening yellow-light times.

"We say, the red-light camera wouldn't have stopped anyone from getting hit," Quinn said. "Once (a city) sees one city getting it miles away, and that first city makes a bunch of money, they want to do it, too. It's like a virus."

Albany, Ore., population 48,000, issued 1,119 [traffic camera](#) tickets for \$77,200 in 2008. By comparison, in 2006 only 4,000 tickets were issued for all traffic infractions.

In St. Peters, Mo., a city of 55,000, red-light cameras resulted in 3,203 tickets issued from January 2007 to September 2008, and drew a total of \$235,973. The city issued 14,836 traffic tickets in fiscal year 2006, but that jumped to 21,745 in 2008, the first full fiscal year with the cameras.

Clive [Police Chief](#) Robert Cox said there's no doubt the cameras are a cheaper option than having an officer on the street.

"With the number of calls for service our city generates, we can't devote that much time to red-light enforcement," Cox said. "We were missing a lot of violations."

But not all cities make money off of the tickets. Contracts between

companies and cities can affect how much money the cities get.

In Clive, for instance, the red-light camera program generated \$39,548.65 between July 2006 and March 2007, but all of that money went to the camera company because Clive didn't ticket enough drivers in any single month to make money. Clive has since changed its contract and now gets a percentage of each ticket.

The largest red-light camera company, Redflex Traffic Systems of Scottsdale, operates red-light or speed cameras in 22 states, and added 79 cities last year. It signed a \$32 million maintenance contract with Chicago last fall, and in just the last three weeks of last year, Redflex added five new cities.

Redflex saw net, after-tax profits of \$10.6 million in fiscal year 2008, up from \$7.3 million the year before.

That ticket in Clive shows why: More than half of the \$75 fine went to Redflex.

"That's ridiculous," said Ashok Manglik, a physician who paid his wife's ticket. "Why should it go to the camera company? At least 90 percent should go to the city."

Some cities, such as Orlando and Atlanta, put all the money back into the program so they don't profit from issuing tickets.

"It was a concern," said Mike Rhodes, manager of the Orlando's Code Enforcement Division. "Without casting aspersions on vendors, we didn't want to be seen as having any incentive to issue these tickets."

Plenty of people have been getting tickets in Orlando.

The city issued 785 "failure to obey a traffic signal" tickets - their equivalent of a red-light violation - between Sept. 1, 2007, and Dec. 31, 2007. But after the cameras were installed in September 2008, Orlando issued 8,250 tickets through its red-light camera program during that four-month period.

The Clive ticket demonstrates how the system works:

A Redflex camera spotted the violation by Manglik, then sent a video to an employee in Arizona who trained for a week to recognize violations. The employee checked municipal laws and approved the initial violation, and the video was then passed to another Redflex worker, who checked the vehicle against a motor-vehicle database to see if the car and tags match. A third employee approved the final evaluation and alerted an officer in Clive, who made the ticket official.

Clive police approve more than 90 percent of violations passed on by Redflex, excluding obvious mistakes such as ambulances and funeral processions. Redflex encourages cities to use signs and provides them to its customers.

"There's very few rejected because it's reviewed three or four times by Redflex," Clive police Lt. Gary Walker said.

The camera companies, participating cities and nonprofit Insurance Institute of Highway Safety, a group funded by auto insurers, argue that the cameras save lives and ultimately cut costs. They estimate the cameras save about \$14 billion annually, largely by reducing emergency-room trips, lowering insurance rates and cutting medical bills.

"I say if you sell fire extinguishers or smoke detectors or bulletproof vests that save police officers' lives and you can make a buck off this, God bless you," said Richard A. Retting, a former senior transportation

engineer and lead researcher who left the Insurance Institute of Highway Safety in September. "How communities work out the details of those finances is up to them."

A 2005 study by the Federal Highway Safety Administration found that after installation of red-light cameras, right-angle or T-bone crashes dropped 28 percent, while rear-end crashes climbed 8 percent.

The researchers found that with property damage included, each site saw a \$40,000 per year drop in damage.

Retting said there's no debate that the cameras cut down on red-light running but that their effect on crash severity is less certain.

In Clive, one of the cameras was responsible for giving Richard Tarlton his first ticket in more than 60 years of driving. But the 76-year-old said that as long as the cameras help police become more efficient, he's all for it.

"If the policemen use their time and do police work, that's great," Tarlton said. "If it's giving them an extra doughnut and coffee break, then I'm not for it."

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