

EDITORIAL

Red-light cameras are saving lives



The flashing devices are the bane of LI drivers, but many serious types of collisions are down. Rear-end collisions persist at intersections with and without cameras. Technology tweaks and fewer distractions can help.

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Long Island's traffic conditions have enraged us for decades, but when Nassau and Suffolk counties added red-light cameras, the anger exploded.

Nobody likes getting a costly ticket: Getting one in the mail, issued by machine, makes drivers furious. Especially when high fees lead motorists to believe the cameras are solely cash grabs.

But the idea that the cameras make roads less safe defies the data.

The cameras were approved by the State Legislature in 2009 and put into widespread use in 2010. They do bring in a lot of money for both counties, although it's more egregious in Nassau, where the total cost of a ticket is \$150, and the program pulled in \$48.5 million in 2016. In Suffolk, the fine is \$80 and the 2016 take was \$31 million.

But high fines can be justified if the goal is safer driving, as both counties claim. The more damaging accusation is that accidents at the camera intersections are increasing. Opponents say cameras cause more rear-end collisions by training drivers to slam on brakes at yellow lights when motorists behind them still hope to slide through.

But an analysis of the numbers in both counties by county officials and Newsday shows that red-light cameras probably haven't caused more accidents of any kind at intersections where they've been installed.

Nassau accidents are down

In Nassau County, accidents at intersections with red-light cameras were down 26 percent in 2016, compared with the number of crashes in the 12-month period before the cameras were installed at

each intersection. Crashes with injuries were down 39 percent, head-on collisions declined 84 percent, side-impact collisions dipped 1 percent and rear-end accidents were down 34 percent.

Both counties are authorized to install cameras at 100 intersections. Nassau has them at 86 intersections, with the number increasing gradually since 2010 and the number of cameras at some intersections increasing, too.

Accidents for all of Nassau have declined, too, but not as much as at the red-light camera intersections, where 5 percent of the county's collisions occur. According to preliminary figures, total accidents in Nassau County in 2017 were down 12 percent compared with 2010, while auto fatalities declined 20 percent and accidents with injuries declined 11 percent.

County officials say they believe the annual total of miles driven in Nassau has increased. And to show cameras do work to improve habits, the officials point to data showing infractions generally decline at an intersection a few years after cameras are installed.

Mixed results in Suffolk

In Suffolk County, the news is more mixed because the data are compiled differently.

The county began installing cameras in 2010, and had nearly maxed out its allotment by 2014. In 2016, total collisions at red-light intersections in the county were 1.5 percent higher, compared with the annual average for the three years before the program began, 2007-09. However, accidents with injuries declined 1.5 percent. Dangerous right-angle collisions were down 23 percent, but rear-end collisions were 35 percent higher. That's a daunting number, but the data suggest, and county officials believe,

that new driver distractions like smartphones are causing the increase in rear-end collisions, not late braking to avoid red-light camera tickets.

Suffolk's rear-end collisions on all roads are up 23 percent compared with 2009, and up a nearly identical 22 percent at red-light-camera intersections in that span.

We all know what's changed on our roads. Many drivers don't focus on driving as they talk on and play with phones and attend to navigation systems and other gadgets.

And while critics claim yellow-light times were reduced to induce violations, officials in both counties categorically deny it has ever happened.

What has to change

The way to reduce hits between vehicles and hits to our wallets is proper driving. That does not mean there aren't ways to improve the red-light cameras. Countdown timers would help, and should be considered. Data studies showing exactly what's going on at each intersection and what could be done to reduce excessive infractions would be welcome. Yellow lights can be safely lengthened a tick.

Further increases in fines and fees will not be tolerated by angry drivers. In Nassau, where only \$45 of the \$150 collected for each ticket goes to administrative costs, and the rest goes to paying police and the general fund, a reduction should be considered. The cost has tripled since 2009.

But it's not red-light cameras that caused any increase in collisions and they do, over time, encourage safer driving.

Getting a citation is frustrating, but the way to avoid it is by driving attentively and following the rules.