



Automated Traffic Safety Camera Frequently Asked Questions

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What are automated traffic safety cameras?

The City of Bellingham Police Department proposes to help increase safety at six key locations by installing cameras that photograph red light and school zone speeding violations as they occur.

Use of automated traffic safety cameras have been shown to reduce these dangerous violations and the serious collisions and injuries that result from them. Numerous studies throughout the U.S. and worldwide, as well as the experiences of many other Washington cities, show significant decreases in violations and collisions after cameras were installed. Often times, a "spillover effect" results from automated enforcement: other intersections not monitored by cameras also see a decrease in violations and accidents because of the presence of enforcement in other areas of the community.

Where will automated traffic safety cameras be located?

Bellingham Police propose to install automated traffic safety cameras at six locations for a one-year pilot beginning in early 2011: four intersections that experience high instances of red-light running and two school zones with high instances of speeding violations:

Red-light cameras:

- Westbound Holly Street at Forest Street (near co-op grocery store)
- Northbound Meridian Street and Telegraph Road (near a bank and restaurant)
- Southbound Samish Way at 36th Street (near Sehome Village)
- Northbound Ellis Street at Lakeway Drive (near the intersection with gas station)

School speed-zone cameras:

- Southbound 3400 block of Northwest Avenue at Alderwood Avenue.
- Westbound 2400 block of Alabama Street at Yew Street.

Isn't this just a way to make money?

No, it is a program designed to protect public safety and prevent accidents. Our community has a growing problem with red-light running and speeding in school zones. Accident statistics, violation data and our studies of various intersections and school zones show that this is a growing public safety problem in Bellingham. For example:

- 30 red-light running violations were observed at the intersection of Holly and Forest during one observation period, conducted for 7.2 hours during the day.
- 52 speeding violations (of 7 miles-per-hour or more over the speed limit) were observed while monitoring the school zone on Alabama Street, conducted for one hour while the school zone warning light was flashing during morning hours.

The solution we propose allows us to use our limited resources and officers in other ways while still tackling this safety problem. In that way it is a violator-funded, rather than a taxpayer-funded, program. Our goals for proposing the use of photo enforcement are to change dangerous driving behaviors, hold violators accountable, and use financial incentives to protect public safety.

How does the program work?

Video and still images are captured: When electronic sensors detect a potential violation, cameras capture still and video photographs of the incident showing the vehicle from behind.

Footage of violations is evaluated: The images are reviewed by vendor representatives, then sent to the Bellingham Police Department for further review. Local Bellingham police officers make the decision about whether a ticket will be issued.

Tickets are sent by mail: A notice of civil infraction is mailed to the registered owner of the vehicle. This mailing includes still photographs showing the alleged infraction, and a website address where a video of the incident can be viewed.

Follow up options are available: Penalties must be paid or actions to appeal must be taken within 14 days. Penalties can be paid by credit card online or by U.S. Mail.

Who decides whether a violation has occurred?

Bellingham police officers make the final decision. The vendor views the footage and sends those showing potential violations to the Bellingham Police Department. Bellingham Police Department traffic officers review each image and make the final determination that a violation has or has not occurred. The vendor then issues a ticket by mail.

How much is the fine?

\$124 for red-light running and \$124 for speeding 5 to 9 miles-per-hour over the speed limit and \$250 for 10 miles-per-hour and over in the school zones.

Are driving records or insurance rates affected?

No. These are civil infractions, not reported to the Washington Department of Licensing or any insurance agencies.

Will the cameras take a picture of the driver of the vehicle?

No. Automated traffic safety cameras may only take pictures of the vehicle and license plate, not the driver or passengers. A violation is a civil infraction assessed against the owner of the vehicle based on vehicle registration data. There is no need to identify the driver and therefore, no need to capture the image of the driver.

Hasn't photo enforcement been ruled unconstitutional?

No. State law (RCW 46.63.170) allows cities to use photo enforcement and sets guidance for its use. State and federal courts have upheld city photo enforcement efforts throughout the state.

If a vehicle is in the intersection when the light is yellow and the light changes to red, will a ticket be issued?

No. The automated system only becomes active once the red light is showing. It will not capture a vehicle if the vehicle enters the intersection prior to the light changing to red. If a vehicle enters an intersection on yellow, it is legal to clear the intersection if the light turns red.

Does the vendor require changes to the timing of green and yellow lights?

No. The vendor being considered does not require nor are there plans by the City to change the timing of lights.

Will seat belt and cell phone laws be enforced using photos?

No. Per state law, the footage of the violation shows the back of the vehicle so we cannot see the driver.

Will bicyclists be cited?

No. There is no registration available for bicyclists so even if we captured bicycle violations with cameras we cannot find them to send them a ticket.

Don't these programs increase the number of rear-end collisions at red lights?

Photo enforcement of red-light running reduces the number of "T-Bone" crashes by 16%, according to traffic safety studies. "T-Bone" crashes are high-damage accidents that can result in severe injuries and/or fatalities. Deaths caused by red-light running are increasing at more than three times the rate of increase for all other fatal crashes.

Some studies show a temporary increase in rear-end collisions as drivers become more cautious of photo enforcement; other studies do not support this conclusion. Most rear-end collisions are the result of following too close and driver inattention, and damage and injuries tend to be far less serious than those caused by red-light running. Rear-end collisions can occur when drivers stop suddenly for red lights or other reasons, regardless of the existence of photo equipment.

Meanwhile, study after study finds that red-light running accidents decrease dramatically after photo enforcement begins. These changes occur at the site of the photo enforcement as well as elsewhere in the community as drivers become more aware and responsible.

How much will it cost to implement this program?

Bellingham Police will contract with a vendor for automated traffic safety services that includes installation and operation of equipment at the six locations identified. The vendor maintains and updates the equipment as needed, reviews footage of violations and accepts payments from violators. The fee for this service is \$4,750 per camera, per month. We will incur approximately \$18,000 in additional costs for computers, video and other equipment for viewing violation footage during court proceedings and for a public viewing kiosk to be located in Bellingham Municipal Court.

We estimate that two paid violations per day will pay for this service for one month. Our agreement with the vendor will state that if the system doesn't generate enough revenue to pay for a particular camera, the City is not responsible for the underage. When school is not in session, we will not pay rental fees for the school zone cameras.

For more information

Contact the Bellingham Police Department, 360-778-8800

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