Traffic safety cameras help change dangerous driving habits
By Todd Ramsay, Bellingham Police Chief

About once a minute, a driver speeds through the school zone on Alabama Street, with children present and safety lights flashing.

At the intersection of Holly and Forest, a driver runs a red light about once every 15 minutes. Not simply “California-style” stops with right turns (which also are illegal), most sail straight through when the light is clearly red, not yellow.

Traffic safety studies, violation data and accident statistics tell us we have a problem in Bellingham, a problem we want to address by installing cameras that photograph red-light running and school zone speeding violations as they occur.

Use of traffic safety cameras has been shown to help drivers change dangerous driving habits and reduce the number of these violations and the serious collisions and injuries that result from them.

The Bellingham City Council is considering adding a new section to the City code, as per state statute (RCW 46.63.170), to allow the use of traffic safety cameras in Bellingham. This step is needed for the Police Department to use cameras at six locations beginning in early 2011: four intersections that experience high instances of red-light running and two school zones with high instances of speeding violations.

Use of photo enforcement is controversial, in large part fueled by outdated or inaccurate information. More details are available on the City website, though let me dispel a few myths here:

- Bellingham police officers determine who gets ticketed.
- Driving records and insurance rates are not affected if you get a photo enforcement ticket.
- You may view the photographs and appeal if you get a photo enforcement ticket.
- Timing of green-yellow-red light cycles will not be changed.
- The cameras cannot be used for seat belt and cell phone use violations.

Our goal is to change dangerous driving behaviors, hold violators accountable, and use financial incentives to protect public safety.

School zone safety
We are particularly alarmed at the high rate of speeding in school zones when our children are present. Lighted school zones remind drivers to slow to 20 miles-per-hour when the lights are flashing during the hours when children are arriving and leaving schools.

In our study on Alabama Street, 52 speeding violations were observed in just one hour, while children were walking to school with the school zone lights flashing. All were violations of 7 miles-per-hour or more over the speed limit.
**Red-light running**
Red-light running is a dangerous violation that can result in serious collisions and injuries. During our study, 30 red-light running violations were observed at the intersection of Holly and Forest over a period of 7.2 hours during the day.

Red-light running causes “T-Bone” crashes, 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, according to traffic safety studies. Photo enforcement of red-light running reduces the number of “T-Bone” crashes by 16%.

We have numerous problem intersections and dozens of school zones in Bellingham, far more than we can constantly monitor using police officers in cars or on motorcycles. Yet we have a responsibility to protect other drivers as well as bicyclists and pedestrians who use the streets, crosswalks and sidewalks in these areas.

During these times of economic stress and limited resources, we are asked to do more with less. Technology allows us to do this, to monitor problem areas consistently, effectively and inexpensively, especially when compared to the cost of posting police officers 24/7 in these locations. We gain enormous public safety value from an automated system that is funded by violators instead of by taxpayers.

The places where we install traffic safety cameras will be well marked. Drivers will have ample opportunity to change their dangerous driving behaviors, and we hope they do. We’d rather have drivers stop putting themselves and others at risk than collect money from tickets.

Our bottom line is the safety of every child walking to school, every bicyclist crossing an intersection and every driver using our streets.

*Bellingham Police Chief Todd Ramsay*