

Speeding Up to Stop!

By **Barnet Fagel**

Driving my Corvette is the best way for me to unwind and get a rare chance to enjoy driving. Lately I have been getting this nagging feeling that I'm getting pick-pocketed while I'm approaching some suburban and especially Chicago intersections. That's because they are equipped with Automated Traffic Enforcement Cameras, otherwise known Red Light Ticket Cameras (RLTC). This is a new street hazard just as bad as axle-busting pot holes, the torrential traffic, black ice, and constrictive construction zones. Now you're forced to keep your eyes skyward towards a possible RLTC, the traffic signal, and the road, while keeping your foot poised over the brake pedal just in case.

The City of Chicago has shelled out enormous sums of cash to requisition 138 of this sleek new red light Cops-in-a-Box. As you approach the intersection on a green light, you assume that you will make it through the green light, but then the light changes to yellow. In an instant you think, "Can I stop or should I go? I should have enough time, shouldn't I?" Then you get your answer as the yellow light snaps to red way before it should have. If you stop too fast you may get rear-ended. If you go through, you wonder if you'll have enough time to clear the intersection. Then you get your answer: a camera's flash fires and you've just been caught in the "dilemma zone." You've just been used, taxed, and dismissed in an instant — tossed away. The city's got other fish to fry, and they're going to get more, so just move on.

RLTCs are scattered throughout the Windy City and more in the suburbs. RLTCs are digital cameras coupled to vehicle sensors designed to record any vehicle that "violates" the red traffic signal. This means that even if your bumper happens to go just a few inches past the stop line, you've earned a ticket that arrives in the mail a few weeks later.

Chicago's fiscal ingenuity encourages the Instamatic red light business plan to cite more motorists in Chicago than in most other cities. The city has fined motorists Fifty Million Dollars just during

2008! The city's much publicized *Forty Million Dollar Hired Truck Scandal* woefully pales by comparison. Mechanized ticketing is done under the color of authority, RED! Is the area really rife with all these purported "red light runners" as the

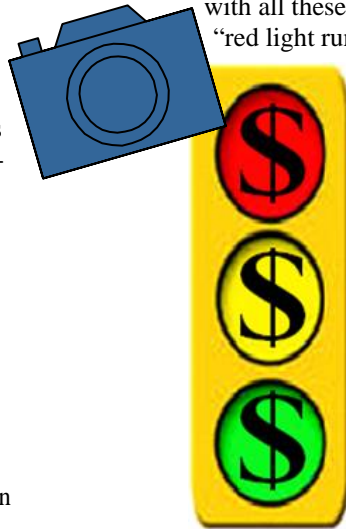


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city claims? The truth is the majority of drivers don't purposely go through red lights so the city's use of the word "runner" rather than "violator" continues to prejudice the public.

Chicago's red light ticket cameras serve obediently throughout their appointed intersections, 24 hours a day, dutifully recording thousands of license plates whose numbers convert into an ever-increasing revenue stream that beats to the pulse of the politicians' pocketbooks. With Chicago forecasting a \$475 million budget shortfall this year, RLTCs are a "XXXXing Golden Thing," an irresistible quasi-legal golden goose. The RLTC redefines the words "Taste of Chicago" once motorists receive their traffic souvenirs from the Department of Revenue.

Why are "scameras" more prolific in Chicago than most other cities? It's simple. The city makes sure the yellow phase of most traffic lights is purposely so short that driv-

ers become trapped. It's the anxious moment when you're approaching a green light and it turns yellow just as you reach the intersection. According to traffic engineers, you've just entered the "dilemma zone."

I have personally timed the traffic lights at over 40 Chicago intersections as a member of the National Motorists Association (motorists.org). I found these traffic signals to have a consistent setting of three seconds of yellow time. Three seconds does not provide an adequate time cushion to allow drivers to stop safely. In fact, the three-second yellow light is the bare federally recommended minimum and does not allow for other factors, such as driver reaction time, average traffic flow speed, weather conditions, vehicle size, accumulated traffic count, the driver's age, visual acuity, cross street width, and *pedestrians*. Chicago allows for none of these safety factors and even admits that all the yellow lights are set equally at three seconds.

Under the guidelines of the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) used by the Federal Highway Administration this is *highly dangerous*.

Chicago conveniently ignores traditional traffic engineering values to keep the traffic-signal cash machines humming. You have to hand it to the politicians; the cameras are their own Ben Franklin printing presses. It is considered a red light violation if the vehicle crosses the stop line by as little as 1/10th of a second after the yellow changes to red!



This is the equivalent of getting a speeding ticket for going *less than a fifth of a mile-per-hour over the speed limit!*

If you happen to get snagged by one of these Instamatic Cops, you'll know it when you receive a citation notice in the mail showing your car's picture and license plate a few weeks after the incident. The notice even offers further on-line video proof of your shameful act on the city's web site. The city doesn't care who drove the car as long as the Department of Revenue can get the owner, because he's on the hook for a \$100 citation. The owner gets taken for a ride.

Machine-issued red light tickets are treated like parking tickets and considered a "civil violation." This means that while you don't get points tacked on your driving record (for the time being), your rights of due process have been taken away. Your options are to pay the \$100 fine or fight it. The problem is your only defense is one of the city's five pre-defined excuses.

Drivers may "appeal" their cases at either of the city's two hearing facilities staffed with city-trained "administrative law officers." The city states the statistical chances of winning are less than one-half percent. Even if the stop markings on the pavement are worn away, the administrative law officer decides in favor of the city claiming "the driver should have stopped at the stop light post."

The administrative law officer's are trained and paid by the city so they are not allowed to consider "reasonable doubt." The administrative decision can be appealed within 35 days at the Daley Center downtown for an additional court fee designed to dissuade this option. The City of Chicago claims: "The red light camera program was introduced to the City in November 2003 and was implemented to reduce speeding and promote safety."

Let's examine this statement. The alleged reason for red light ticket cameras is to take pictures of red light violators. The cameras aren't equipped to measure the vehicle's speed, at least for the time being. A recent story in the *Chicago Tribune* states that the RLTC's may have the ability added to cross-reference an offender's license plate and to investigate the car's insurance policy status. The result: more automated income.

How do red light ticket cameras promote safety if people perceive that they

may have to jam on their brakes in fear of a receiving a \$100 ticket? Red light ticket cameras don't prevent violations, they document engineering deficiencies. Most intersection accident factors are caused by drunken drivers, authorized emergency vehicles, or people overdosed on drugs or over-medicated patients. But RLTCs do increase accidents by not allowing drivers enough time to safely stop, and they are great at capitalizing on shortened yellow lights. If the driver does manage to suddenly stop in time, it sets the stage for a rear-end accident. So much for increasing safety!

Ten independent traffic studies have clearly shown that ticket cameras are a unanimous, catastrophic safety failure and that lengthening the yellow light by just one second reduces red light violations up to 70%. This engineering change is a minimal cost, and the rewards are instantaneous for motorists and pedestrians as shown by a Michigan AAA safety study.

Chicago's Office of Emergency Management and Communications web site states: The "*Office of Emergency Management and Communications (OEMC) is using red-light camera enforcement to make Chicago intersections safer. Intersections are equipped with red-light cameras, which photograph vehicles running red lights. Motorists violating a red light will receive a \$90 (raised to \$100) fine in the mail.*

"Red-light camera enforcement programs are designed to improve safety and positively change driver behavior. The cameras have a proven track record of reducing red-light running and the accidents and injuries it causes. Dozens of cities across the U.S. use red-light camera programs, and they have seen reductions in accidents of between 30 to 80%.

"Officials from the Chicago Office of Emergency Management and the Chicago Police Department analyzed accident statistics at dozens of Chicago intersections to determine the locations with the highest incidence of so-called "right-angle" crashes — those consistent with a driver running a red light." (from the OEMC web site)

The real facts: the city's web site bases its claims on studies from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS). Their claims are that "their" traffic studies prove cameras reduce accidents and "red light runners."

These studies have been shown to be flawed, sponsor influenced, and do not meet the minimal verifiable statistical study rules. The results have never been reproduced by any other autonomous organization. The government and institute's findings are heavily influenced by red light camera and insurance company political power brokers.

The government's safety premise seems very logical and well intentioned at first until the layers of misrepresentation, misdirection, and misinformation are peeled back. See www.motorists.org. It comes as no surprise that the city's monetary crisis is the prime motivation for red light ticket cameras while safety takes a back seat.

Chicago joins the growing list of dubious cities including Chattanooga, Tennessee, Dallas, Texas, Springfield, Missouri, Lubbock, Texas, Nashville, Tennessee, and Union City, California that have been caught cheating the motoring public by using short-timed yellow lights and taking pictures. Their respective local news outlets focused news cameras on the red light ticket cameras and documented short-changed yellow lights. These stories exposed the city's selfish and dangerous practices. A growing list of governments has ceased using or outlawed red light ticket cameras. In Washington, D.C. the district was caught tampering with survey results of a post camera traffic study to cover up the real accident increases. The police chief even lied about it on camera.

When the city opts to ignore accepted traffic engineering practices and purposely shortens the yellow traffic light timing cycle in spite of the known risks, they knowingly participate in cases of spontaneous legal entrapment. The sad result of this is that many surrounding Chicago suburbs have aped the city by setting up their own red light ticket cameras, but hopefully they do the recommended traffic engineering surveys first to see if they really have a problem. It depends on who makes the decision, the engineering or the finance departments.

There is an old adage that states, "If you want to find out the truth about something, just follow the dollar." In the case of red light ticket cameras, "If you want to find out the lies about something, just follow the dollar." ●