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Los Angeles traffic cameras may get the red light

Citing costs and safety issues, the Police Commission votes to shut the cameras down. Unless the City Council intervenes, their use at 32 intersections could end within weeks.

By Joel Rubin, Los Angeles Times

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The Los Angeles Police Commission has voted to kill the city's controversial red-light camera program, rejecting claims that the system makes streets safer while costing the city nothing.

Tuesday's vote means that the red-light cameras installed at 32 intersections throughout the city could stop operating within a few weeks unless the City Council takes the unusual step of stripping the Police Commission of its authority over the issue.

The move places Los Angeles at the center of a national debate about the cameras. The Los Angeles Police Department and other police agencies say the cameras have helped reduce accidents, largely by deterring drivers looking to run red lights or make illegal turns. Critics of the technology, however, have questioned officials' accident data, saying the cameras instead cause rear-end collisions as drivers slam on their brakes. They have also likened the cameras to Big Brother tactics designed to generate revenues.

If the commission's action stands, L.A. would become the latest U.S. city to pull the cameras. Several others have vowed never to install them, including Anaheim, where voters overwhelmingly banned them last year.

The Police Commission's unanimous vote came as somewhat of a surprise to police officials, who went into the meeting armed with a recommendation that the commission award a new three- or five-year contract to the company that has been operating the network of cameras for the last several years.

Instead of discussing the merits of that company's service over other bidders, however, commissioners returned to a debate that has played out at several previous meetings in recent months and focused on the basic questions of whether the cameras do any good and are cost-effective.

LAPD officials throughout the discussions have stood firm in the belief that the cameras increase safety, and they pointed to an internal review of accident data that, they said, shows the cameras have led to a 62% decrease in red-light collisions and no significant increase in rear-end collisions. Those figures, police said, were far better than the 22% decrease in red-light collisions at all city intersections.

Members of the commission looked on those figures with skepticism. They also questioned the legitimacy of the citations issued to drivers photographed running red lights or involved in other moving violations. Because the Los Angeles County Superior Court system does not criminally pursue people who fail to pay the tickets, which typically run more than \$400, the camera program essentially was "a voluntary citation program. There's no teeth in it, no enforcement," said Commissioner Alan Skobin.

The court could alert the Department of Motor Vehicles when a driver fails to pay a ticket and request that a hold be placed on the vehicle owner's license. The court ignores that option; instead it mails notices to vehicle owners warning that an additional \$300 fine will be added if the citation is not resolved. If no response is received, the court forwards the vehicle owner's name to a collection agency. Court officials have defended the decision, saying it complies with the law.

In L.A., more than 180,000 motorists have received camera-issued tickets since the program started in 2004. The vast majority were for illegal right-hand turns.

The commissioners also balked at the idea that it would cost the city more to operate the cameras than they would generate in revenue from tickets. Various proposals presented to the commission estimated that it would cost between \$4 million and \$5 million each year while bringing in only about \$3.5 million annually.

The camera program has often been touted by supporters as a service that paid for itself, although that claim came under scrutiny last year in an audit by Controller Wendy Greuel, who found it to be inaccurate.

The expense, said Commission President John Mack, was untenable as the city remains mired in fiscal crisis.

"We have to ask, 'What is the benefit to the public? What is the downside?'" said Commissioner Debra Wong Yang. "And I'm not convinced from looking at the numbers that these cameras work."

Those sentiments were echoed by several members of the public who attended the meeting to urge the commission to do away with the cameras, which trigger seemingly boundless frustration and anger among drivers in traffic-obsessed L.A.

"It's something that angers ... me every time I get in my car," said Hollywood resident Christina Heller, 27. "These cameras remove our fundamental right in this country to confront our accuser. And they do not do anything to improve safety."

Executives from American Traffic Solutions, the company recommended for the contract, made a last-ditch bid to change the commission's position, saying the decision to shut down the cameras would result in increased accidents and injuries.

Bart Reed, executive director of the Transit Coalition, a local advocacy group, voiced support for

red-light cameras, saying they help keep in check "many wild and crazy motorists on the streets that have no bounds or respect on the safety or security of others."

Councilman Greig Smith, who heads the council's Public Safety Committee, agreed with the commission, saying the program has been a drain on city finances. He added that the cameras had only a "marginal" effect on traffic safety and said he doubted that his colleagues on the City Council would find the 10 votes needed to overturn the commission's decision.

"I don't think anyone on the council wants to get up and be the proponent of bringing it back to life," he said. "No one's been a big fan over here."

Similarly, Councilman Dennis Zine commended the commission's decision, calling the camera program flawed and a waste of taxpayer money.

"It's a dishonest program," said Zine, a former traffic cop. "This thing really mocks the public."

Several months ago, the council granted the LAPD the authority to seek bidders for a new camera contract and allowed the department to expedite the process. If they allow the cameras to go dark and there are accidents at the intersections, council members could face political scorn and possible lawsuits.

Councilman Tony Cardenas, who has been a supporter of the cameras, said he would ask the City Council to get involved in the matter only if the courts begin aggressive enforcement of the tickets.

Under the provisions of the City Charter, the council would need 10 votes to take jurisdiction over the commission's decision. If the council mustered enough votes to do so, the red-light camera contract issue would then go to the council's five-member public safety committee, which is headed by Smith.