

Thursday, January 31st 2008

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Red Light Cameras Working Well In Sugar Land

by John Pape, Jan 30, 2008, 09 40 AM

Sugar Land's red light cameras have been in effect for almost two months, and Police Chief Steve Griffith said that so far they are proving to be both reliable and effective in identifying stop light violators.

The cameras are located at U.S. Hwy. 59 and State Hwy. 6, U.S. Hwy 59 and Williams Trace and State Hwy. 6 and Lexington. A camera planned for Eldridge and West Airport has not been installed due to construction at the intersection.

Red light camera enforcement began Dec. 6 with only warning notices being sent to violators for the first 30 days. The first month was also used to make certain the system was working as planned, Griffith said.

"During the warning period, it was not only a chance to send out warning notices and raise awareness of the system, but to make sure everything was working appropriately," Griffith said. "We found that the system was working very well."

Since the testing period, violation notices have been mailed to drivers caught running red signals. Griffith stressed that each violation is carefully checked and verified before a violation notice is sent out.

"When the system detects a violation, the company that operates the system makes certain that we can clearly see the plate number and the vehicle can be identified. Then, after the registration of the vehicle is verified, it is forwarded to the police department for further review," Griffith explained. "At the police department, it is forwarded to one of several sergeants who review each violation. Once a sergeant has verified the violation, only then is a violation notice sent out."

Griffith said that if there is any uncertainty, or if anything cannot be verified, the violation is disregarded. The entire verification process can take up to a week before a violation is sent out.

So far, the cameras have been detecting 80 - 85 violation per day, per location. That, Griffith said, was about what the department expected.

"That's pretty close to what we expected," Griffith said. "We'll probably see that go down by about half as drivers adjust their driving habits. That's what we want to happen."

Because the cameras have been in effect for only a short period of time, no statistics were yet available on the number of violation notices issued or the amount of fines collected.

The high-speed cameras are activated automatically when a vehicle enters the intersection after the signal has turned red. A series of images is taken of each vehicle that enters against a red signal.

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One of the images is taken from the back showing the intersection and the back of the violating vehicle in front of the stop line and one of more of the red signals. The second shot, also taken from the rear, shows the back of the vehicle after the rear axle has crossed the stop line. A magnified close-up of the license plate is retrieved from one of the other two images.

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Resident Bob Jackson said that he's glad to see Sugar Land install red light cameras and hopes to see more.

"I was in an accident in Houston a couple of years ago after some guy tried to make it through after the light turned red. That kind of thing happens all the time and people get injured or killed because of irresponsible drivers," Jackson said. "Anything that the city can do, I'm OK with. I'd like to see (red light cameras) at all stop lights."

County resident Chris Murphy said that he drives Hwy. 6 every day and agrees that red light violators are a problem, but does not like the idea of red light cameras.

"I just don't like them. You have a right to confront your accuser and there's no way to do that with a camera," Murphy said. "If they want to do it right, put cops there to catch people running red lights."

Whether or not more red light cameras are installed in Sugar Land is yet to be determined. Griffith said that the department will re-evaluate intersections near the end of summer. At that time, more locations may be recommended to city council, or some cameras may be recommended for removal.

"If we feel there is no longer a problem at a given intersection, taking (cameras) away is an option, too," Griffith said. "The cameras are leased and can be moved if necessary."

Any location must be approved by city council before a red light camera system is installed. Currently, only one approved intersection, Eldridge at West Airport, has not yet had the cameras installed.

"We did not install the cameras at that intersection because of the construction," Griffith said. "With the completion of the work, we will do another traffic count to see if red light cameras are still warranted at that location."

1 PU - Jan 30, 10:40 AM

While there is one on the southbound side of U.S. Hwy 59 and Williams Trace, there also needs to be one on the northbound side. There are people constantly running the light on the feeder northbound.

2 Elizabeth - Jan 30, 01:39 PM

Whether these cameras are "working" has really yet to be seen. In studies of similar systems in other cities, they found that while fewer red lights were run, the number of accidents at those intersections increased, so the whole theoretical point of traffic laws gets kind of negated by red-light cameras. So if "working" means making the intersections safer, we'll have to wait and see.

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