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Local 2 Investigates Red-Light Camera Rumors

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HOUSTON -- Note: The following story is a verbatim transcript of an Investigators story that aired on Monday, Feb. 11, 2008, on KPRC Local 2 at 10 p.m.

We were the first to show you what happens when the city's own vehicles are caught on camera running red lights. We compared accidents at those intersections before and after the installation of red-light cameras. Now we're investigating drivers' suspicions that you're being shortchanged -- not in dollars, but in time.

Investigative reporter Amy Davis breaks out the stopwatch on the yellow lights that mean all the difference between getting a ticket or not.

It's no secret how they work. If a red light camera sees red and you're seen running it, you'll soon see a ticket.

But viewers are asking Local 2 Investigates a question of a different color. Are the yellow lights long enough to give you a fair shot at getting through those intersections?

Steve Ivy says no.

"It doesn't give you enough time to stop your vehicle," Ivy told Local 2.

Cameras caught Ivy running the red light on FM 1960 at West Townsend in Humble. But Ivy believes he was shortchanged by a short yellow light.

"I realize as short as this time is, you can't stop in the amount of time it allows you before it turns red," explained Ivy.

That particular yellow light stays yellow for 3.6 seconds. The speed limit is 50 mph.

Ivy put those numbers into a Texas Department of Transportation formula that roughly recommends five seconds of yellow for an intersection with a speed limit of 50 mph, four seconds of yellow for 40 mph and so on.

"If they're not what they should be, they should be corrected," said Ivy.

We checked yellow after yellow at red-light camera intersections all over Humble, Houston and Sugar Land.

At the 59 service road and Fountainview, the yellow lasted four seconds. It was just 3.6 seconds on the North Freeway feeder and West Road.

On the eastside, it's 3.6 seconds at the Interstate 10 feeder and Wayside. All of those roads have speed limits higher than 40 mph.

The numbers show if Ivy's right, using that TxDOT formula, you are being shortchanged by those yellow lights.

But TxDOT says it's not that simple.

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"You really have to look at every intersection individually," said Norm Wigington, a spokesman for TxDOT.

"The geometry, the timing, the volume -- all of those things have to be taken into account. And intersections are different," Wigington said.

Wigington says the yellow light formula is a basic guide created years ago. It is not a strict requirement.

The law only says yellow lights have to be between three and six seconds. All of the lights we checked all over the Houston area were within that boundary.

But many of you asked us if cities shortened the yellow lights when they installed the red-light cameras.

Local 2 Investigates asked the city of Houston for the yellow light times at 25 intersections before and after red-light cameras were installed. All of the yellow lights we checked time out the same now as they did before the red light cameras.

One more rumor put to rest in Houston. But we didn't stop there.

After a lot of digging and driving, we did discover one place where engineers did change the timings of the yellow lights. But it's not what you might think.

"There were a number of lights all along Highway 6 where we actually increased the duration of the yellow," said Sugar Land Mayor David Wallace.

That's right. Many of the yellow lights in Sugar Land are a second longer than they used to be. On average, most are 26 percent longer, giving those rumors here the red light.

"It's just the opposite. We want to make sure it does give them more time to get though the intersection," Wallace explained.

We found evidence that increasing the duration of yellow lights does reduce red light running. A nationwide study shows increasing the yellow by one second reduced red light violations by 36 percent.

But that same study shows the cameras work even better. The study shows the cameras reduced violations by 96 percent.

List Of Red-Light Camera Locations:

- [Red-Light Cameras: Houston, Humble, Sugar Land](#)

Previous Local 2 Investigates Stories:

- December 4, 2007: [Ask Amy: Where Do Red-Light Camera Fines Go?](#)
- November 19, 2007: [Do Red-Light Cameras Reduce Accidents?](#)
- February 27, 2007: [Ask Amy: How Do Red-Light Cameras React To Turns?](#)
- February 21, 2007: [City Vehicles Caught By Red-Light Cameras](#)

Other Previous Stories:

- November 5, 2007: [Red-Light Cameras Snap Violators In Sugar Land](#)
- November 1, 2007: [Red-Light Cameras To Ticket Humble Drivers](#)

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