

Seeing Red

By Jonathan Copsey / STAFF

We've all done it: the yellow light is about to turn red and, instead of slowing down, we continue forward (perhaps even speeding up a little) and sail through the intersection before that little light turns, in the clear and continuing on to our destination.

Six weeks later we get the ticket.

\$70 to be paid for turning on a red light? Impossible! We are all law-abiding citizens and safe drivers to boot. It must be wrong, right?

But there's a picture – a before-and-after snapshot of a violation in action. That moment of dumbstruck shock sets in at having been recorded breaking the law in the same grainy video that catches gas station thieves and bank robbers, our license plate plainly visible. Anger shortly follows.

Thanks to the miracles of modern technology, residents in Roswell and Alpharetta face this scenario every day. The red light cameras are out there on numerous intersections, their steady eye waiting to catch the guilty, and becoming reviled by those who feel it is another sign of their government abusing citizens.

Alpharetta and Roswell are two of only three municipalities in Georgia that have adopted the camera system sold by traffic control company Nestor Inc. Fulton County and Douglas County have also implemented the system. In Roswell, the cameras have been installed at two intersections: Holcomb Bridge Road and Alpharetta Highway (Hwy 9) and Mansell Road and Highway 9. Alpharetta is much the same, with a whopping seven watched intersections: two on Highway 9, two on Highway 120 (Old Milton Parkway), two on North Point Parkway and one at the intersection of Windward Parkway and Westside Parkway.

The camera program is certainly a financial wonder for the cities. Roswell, which started its program in March of 2007 garnered over \$2 million in little over a year and paid Nestor Inc. only \$300,000, or \$150,000 per intersection. Alpharetta, which installed the cameras in June of 2005, has earned over \$3 million over three years and paid about \$1.5 million, or an average of \$220,000 per intersection. These numbers are purely the citation revenue and do not include overhead for the cities, such as the pay of officers watching the traffic.

"We don't want people to get citations," said Roswell police chief Ed Williams when Roswell installed its cameras last year. "We want them to stop at red lights. To me, the program would be a huge success if no one

ran a red light and we issued zero tickets."

TECHNICAL TICKETS

For the few who have not been caught by The Man, the ticketing process works like this: when the camera takes its picture of your shiny vehicle running a red light, a video of the entire infraction is sent to the police who have trained officers looking over each violation. If the officer feels that the camera caught a definitive crime, then the officer issues a ticket. You then get the ticket and are expected to pay it, but you do have the option of contesting the citation, as is the right of everyone who is ticketed. The local police department has a certified officer who sifts through all the recorded data and issues tickets to those he deems are irrefutable. Payments are made to the city.

A few red light runners have challenged their tickets despite the photographic evidence, and there are mixed outcomes. In Roswell, 265 people challenged their tickets. 87 tickets were upheld, 71 overturned. So it's about a 50 percent dismissal rate. Over 100 people either failed to appear in court or had to reschedule. Every person issued a ticket has the opportunity to view the evidence of their infraction, either in person or over the Internet, before they pay.

According to Nestor Inc., the video technology can actually recognize when a violation is in action and can delay the red light for

cross traffic to allow the perpetrator safely through. Each violation is fully recorded from the time the vehicle enters the intersection to when they leave it. It is taped from several angles, allowing for multiple views and for the possibility of allowing mitigating circum-

stances to be recorded (such as emergency vehicles interfering with normal flow of traffic). This should make it very difficult to refute.

Looking at the numbers, it is Roswell drivers who have to learn to obey the law more than Alpharetta motorists: the Holcomb Bridge/Highway 9 intersection alone earned more than \$1 million from violators in just one year, which is as much as Alpharetta's seven cameras made in three years. Roswell also has a problem with paying their tickets, with about 25 percent of tickets outstanding. Compare that to only 6 percent in Alpharetta.

WHY HAVE CAMERAS?

"They were put in to improve public safety or to reduce certain types of accidents," said



The cameras have invoked the ire of motorists caught running red lights.



The busy intersection of Holcomb Bridge Road and Highway 9 is one of only a handful in the area that is equipped with Red Light Cameras.

Photos by Jonathan Copsey / STAFF

Roswell City Administrator Kay Love. "We had to do intersection studies and analysis to determine the intersections that had higher numbers of accidents based upon the number of vehicles traveling through the intersection. Before any can go up, and the ones that are currently up, have to be permitted by the GDOT."

Official explanations that having cameras reduces traffic accidents mostly hold true. For Roswell's intersections, angled collisions were down by almost half from 2006 to 2007. Rear-end collisions, however, especially at Holcomb Bridge Road, have risen sharply. This could be attributed to an unfortunate side effect of the cameras – people are stopping too quickly when the light turns red or yellow, which happens suddenly, as anyone caught by the cameras can attest to.

The question of a quick yellow light is a sticky one. According to the City of Roswell, there is a complicated formula that is used to determine the appropriate time needed for a yellow light to stay on. This formula takes into account lane width, intersection size, speed of approach, etc. The usual times are between three and four seconds. In the case of the intersections on Highway 9, which is a state road, the municipalities have little control over signal timing. It's up to GDOT.

LEGISLATION

With all the confusion and anger surrounding the use of cameras, it was only a matter of time before the politicians stepped in. The Georgia General Assembly recently passed legislation, House Bill 77, that controls what municipalities may do with their cameras, en-

suring that the cameras are installed because of safety risks and not revenue.

A \$70 cap was imposed on the amount that may be charged, and yellow lights must follow the usual formula for any given intersection but add one extra second. Before adding cameras, a study must be conducted to determine if cameras are the best way to solve traffic issues; signage or a redesign of the intersection are examples of other alternatives that must be considered. GDOT must give the

green light for each project and has the power to make snap inspections on any equipment and recordings. Finally, the government may not use the potential influx of revenue as a reason to add the cameras.

Governor Sonny Perdue recently signed the bill into law. It will take effect at the end of the year. Another bill is winding its way through the legislature that will lower the maximum penalty from \$70 to \$50.

No matter where you stand on the cameras, they do seem to be doing their job, with the cold, ruthless efficiency that machines do. There is no pleading, no tears, no flirting with an officer in the hope of getting off with a warning – the camera does not care who you are or where you are going. It only cares that the law was broken.

With the evidence that major accidents are down since installation and the sheer amount of money to be made from ticketing, there seems little use in arguing against the cameras. We may be safer, but our wallets are a little lighter.

If there is a lesson to be learned from these cameras, it is a simple one: don't run red lights.

List of Camera Intersections

ROSWELL

1. Holcomb Bridge and Alpharetta Highway/ Hwy 9
2. Mansell Road and Alpharetta Highway/ Hwy 9

ALPHARETTA

1. Haynes Bridge Rd at North Point Pkwy
2. North Point Pkwy at Mansell Rd
3. Hwy 120 at North Point Pkwy
4. Hwy 120 at Haynes Bridge Rd
5. Hwy 9 at Hwy 120
6. Hwy 9 at Academy St
7. Windward Pkwy at Westside Pkwy