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Red-light cam disgrace

Crashes increase 18% at intersections where devices installed



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Rather than becoming a safer intersection, Talbot and Watt has become far more dangerous since the installation of red-light cameras. (BRIAN DONOGH/WINNIPEG SUN)

The average number of collisions at Winnipeg's 12 original red-light camera intersections has jumped 18% since the devices were installed in 2003, according to Manitoba Public Insurance data obtained by the Winnipeg Sun.

Despite claims by politicians and police brass that intersection cameras are making our streets safer by reducing collisions, the MPI data shows after six years of use, crashes at the intersections are actually going up, not down.

There was a combined 204 collisions in 2003 at the original 12 intersections where red-light cameras were first installed. Between 2004 and 2009, the average number of annual collisions rose to 241 - an 18% increase.

The numbers represent all collisions at the intersections where an insurance claim was made.

And it's not just a few intersections driving up the average, either. The average number of collisions between 2004 and 2009 rose at nine of the 12 sites.

Crashes fell slightly at two intersections and they remained virtually flat at one.

One of the worst intersections was the corner of Talbot Avenue and Watt Street, where there were 25 collisions the year red-light cameras went in. That number dipped slightly to 23 the next year but then jumped to 31, 29, 33, 42 and 40, respectively, in each of the following five years. Rather than becoming a safer intersection, Talbot and Watt has become far more dangerous.

The same goes for the corner of Isabel Street and William Avenue. The number of crashes at that location in 2003 was 21. But that number jumped immediately the next year to 36 and annual crash numbers were 22, 35, 34, 30 and 33, respectively, in each of the next five years.

It's not as though the numbers are trending down in more recent years, either.

The average number of annual crashes in 2008 and 2009 went up or remained stable at eight of 12 locations compared with 2003.

Even the four sites where collisions went down in 2008 and 2009, the decreases were minimal. No matter how you slice the numbers, crashes have been going up at the vast majority of intersections where cameras were installed in 2003.

We know studies in the U.S. have shown that intersection cameras have increased collisions in some cities for a number of reasons, including motorists unnecessarily slamming on their brakes early because they think they may be ticketed for entering an intersection on an amber light.


Others race through hoping to beat the red light to avoid a ticket.

The question now is, how come the city has not been on top of this over the past seven years, analyzing the collision data and being straight with the public on whether these devices are truly making Winnipeg streets safer?

The answer is obvious. This program is about money, not safety.

If it were about safety, these numbers would have been made available by the city in their annual reports to the province on photo enforcement. They have not been made available. If the Winnipeg Sun had not obtained them from MPI, these statistics would not even be in the public domain.

Instead, the city has been using police-reported collisions in their annual reports on photo enforcement, which has shown a decrease in crashes.

Police-reported collisions are incomplete because many crashes aren't reported to police. The MPI data is far more  because it's based on insurance claims.

In fact, a 2006 city auditor report on photo enforcement blasted city officials for failing to use MPI data in their reports. Despite that, the city has ignored that recommendation and refused to include the MPI data in their annual reports to the Manitoba Legislature.

And now we know why. If they did include them, it would clearly show the public red-light cameras are making intersections less safe. That might cut into the \$5 million a year photo enforcement raises for city hall.

Mayor Sam Katz has always sworn up and down that photo enforcement is not about the money and that it's entirely about safety.

He may have a tough time explaining these numbers.

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