

Cameras to focus on red-light runners

By Don Grigas

Staff writer

Motorists who zip through red lights in Bolingbrook in the future could be on the receiving end of traffic citations issued not by a police officer, but by a mail carrier.

And roadway speeders are also in the village's crosshairs as well.

During the 20th annual state of the village address, Mayor Roger Claar announced the village will soon install four "red-light" cameras at signaled intersections throughout town in the next few months as part of Project Red Speed.

Owners of vehicles caught on camera going through red lights illegally would receive a ticket in the mail, and would have to pay a fine. The fine amount has yet to be determined.

Village administrators will meet with members of the Police Department in the next few days to select the four intersections that will receive the cameras, according to Jim Boan, village attorney.

"Without speaking for the board, I think we would like to see this in place by the end of March," Boan said.

Although no discussion has taken place about potential fines, Boan said "an appropriate range would likely be in the \$75 to \$100 range."

Fine limits will be set before the village adopts its fiscal year 2007-08 budget in April, Boan said.

In the past Claar has said cameras should be installed to catch speeders in residential areas, but the state has not authorized camera use for speeding yet.

During his address Jan. 18 Claar asked Illinois state Sen. A.J. Wilhelmi, D-43rd District, of Crest Hill, and Illinois House Rep. Brent Hassert, R-85th District, of Romeoville, to seek legislation authorizing cameras to catch speeders in addition to red light violators.

Boan said because the village doesn't have the statutory authority to issue tickets for speeding and other moving violations by using a camera, an ordinance must be written and adopted so the village can pursue ordinance violators.

"We will draft an ordinance about traffic signals and get it passed before (the cameras) are operational," Boan said.

The cameras would be electronically connected with traffic signals so that

they would "energize" at some time when the signal turns yellow, Boan said. After a brief delay the camera would begin recording, and motorists entering the intersection when the signal is red would be caught on camera and the license plate noted and tracked.

A citation then could be issued to the owner of the motor vehicle.

"We can't issue a ticket to the driver because you cannot tell who the driver is from the image. But you can get the license plate and issue a ticket to the vehicle owner," Boan said.

No estimates on the potential impact on revenue have been worked up yet, but Boan said projections likely will be completed by the time budget hearings begin in February for fiscal year 2007-08.

In the past Claar has spoken openly about what he considers a national epidemic of speeding and other unsafe driving practices by drivers who not only break the law, but endanger area residents.

"Nowadays it is not uncommon so see people going 45 or 50 miles an hour on a residential street," Claar said. "It scares people to death."

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Red light cameras stalled

IDOT guidelines not in place

By Jake Griffin
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Almost since the advent of traffic signals, the yellow bulb in the middle essentially has served as an invitation for many drivers to step on it.

Some towns now want to put the brakes on that practice by installing cameras at dangerous intersections to catch violators trying to beat the light.

So what's taking so long? The state legislature in May paved the way for such enforcement efforts, but few such cameras have materialized.

So far, Chicago and Bellwood are the only Illinois communities with active "red light" photo enforcement equipment in place to monitor intersections.

Municipal officials say they've been hampered, in part, because of a lack of policy guidance from the Illinois Department of Transportation and county transportation departments. That's key because most of the troublesome intersections in many towns involve either state or county roads.

Naperville is one of the cities that finds itself in such a quandary.

"I want these things at major intersections in the city that are top 10 crash sites," city Councilman Richard Furstenau said. "I don't want them going up on Naperville streets where we'd be giving tickets just to give tickets."

Waiting for a policy

That's part of the pickle Naperville finds itself in. City officials have earmarked nearly \$2.5 million for the technology to be installed at 15 intersections over the next two years.

Officials want the cameras at intersections along Route 59 — a state-controlled road — and 75th Street — a road governed by DuPage County.

"IDOT is still forming a policy on how they're going to treat these municipal requests," said Andy Hynes, a Naperville project engineer. "It's a new technology, so it may take a little time."

He said a decision from IDOT is expected soon, but he wants the city to be ready to go when it's decided.

He will present the city council with a progress report on the program on Feb. 20. He said the report will allow the council to guide the direction of the program in anticipation of monitoring guidelines.

One thing state transportation officials have made clear is that they don't want any pavement torn up to put in sensors for the photo equipment, which is installed over the intersection.

That restriction could limit the kinds of systems municipalities can use and also could affect costs, police said.

Camera in service

Bellwood has only one camera in service and it covers the northbound approach along 25th Street at Harrison Street. Both roads are controlled by the village.

In a little more than a month of operation, nearly 500 citations have been issued to scofflaws who blew through red lights, said Richard Blass, public information officer for the Bellwood Police Department.

"We picked this intersection initially to control the red light next to a (middle) school," he said. "We're concerned with curbing bad behavior, but it's too early to tell what kinds of results we have with the limited amount of data we have."

While bureaucracy is slowing implementation of such systems elsewhere, it isn't the only stumbling block.

The program's uncertain impact on local court systems also is slowing things.

By adding automatic eyes of the law above intersections, cities could add hundreds of traffic cases each month to county court systems.

While processing the guilty will add time to court dockets, adjudicating appeals could require hiring more people. That frightens many officials.

"If this was introduced countywide it would be an increase on their workload," said Jill Pelka-Wilger, Naperville's city prosecutor. "I've had a very informal conversation with the chief traffic court judge and the initial response was to monitor the impact through traffic court for a small number of cameras."

Blass said there have been several appeals and a few tickets have been overturned in Bellwood. It's all handled in-house, though.

"I encourage people to challenge it because it's not the police officer's word versus the offender's word," he said. "It's several color photographs that show the violation occurring."

Safety concerns

Naperville officials are proposing two intersections be monitored during the first year of the program and then adding 13 more if it's successful and manageable.

Hynes said the council would be given a list of possible intersections to start with.

The one at North Aurora Road and Route 59 is the most crash-prone with 102 in 2005, but crashes at the intersection of Mill Street and Ogden Avenue are more apt to cause injuries. The latter also is near two schools.

Hynes said studies have shown camera enforcement at intersections can reduce crashes by 50 percent.

In 2003, Naperville participated in a Federal Highway Administration study that looked at motorists who run red lights.

Cameras were mounted to monitor the northbound approach of Ogden Avenue at Aurora Avenue for 61 days. The data determined an average of 52 cars a day violated just the northbound red lights of that intersection.

"We're just trying to get people to obey existing laws," Hynes said.

He said the technology works by taking a picture of a car before it crosses into the intersection on a red light. Then another picture is taken while the car is in the intersection. A final picture is a close-up of the vehicle's license plate.

If vehicles are inside the intersection before the light turns red — waiting to turn left or trapped by congestion — drivers will not be ticketed if they pass through after the light turns

red.

Most companies lease the monitoring equipment to the city and handle the processing of tickets as well. Companies charge a flat rate for use of the technology and are forbidden by state law from being paid by the number of tickets.

Furstenau said he would be more comfortable if the city was the sole proprietor of the monitoring equipment.

"I'm not interested in lining the pockets of some manufacturer on the backs of taxpayers," he said. "If that means we have to wait for competition in the market, then we wait."

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