

Iowa House panel OKs red light, speed camera ban

By Andrew Duffelmeyer Associated Press | Posted: Wednesday, January 25, 2012 5:32 pm

DES MOINES -- A legislative panel approved a measure Wednesday banning the use of automated red light and speed cameras, despite testimony from law enforcement and city officials supporting their use.

A House transportation subcommittee moved the bill forward to the full House Transportation Committee. And Rep. Walt Rogers, a Cedar Falls Republican overseeing the legislation, thinks the bill has a chance of being approved this year.

"I do think there's good support for it in our caucus," Rogers said.

Several Iowa cities use the devices, including Sioux City, Des Moines and Cedar Rapids. Officials in Sioux City said banning the cameras would make roads less safe and require city officials to find other revenue sources to replace an estimated \$3.3 million in annual revenue from two speed cameras and 11 red-light cameras already in use.

The bill, if approved, would take effect July 1.

Sioux City Mayor Bob Scott said the speed cameras help maintain safety in the Interstate 29 construction zones. He said the stretch of interstate in Sioux City, which is in the midst of a massive reconstruction project, is a dangerous place for officers to pull over speeders.

Cameras placed along I-29 in Sioux City recorded the speed of 2,194,092 vehicles from May 1 to Dec. 31. Violations were issued to 8,694 vehicles, according to data from the Sioux City Police Department.

"I think that they serve a very useful purpose," Scott said.

In addition to safety, revenue from the cameras is already built into this year's budget. Officials estimate they'll collect \$1.3 million from the red-light cameras and \$2 million from the speed cameras by the time the fiscal year ends June 30.

Scott, though in favor of reducing the fees for violations caught on camera, said officials will have to find other revenue sources for city projects if the cameras are banned. Camera revenue is earmarked for several projects, including construction of a new fire station on Dearborn Boulevard.

"It'll cause us to make some adjustments, there's no question about that," Scott said.

Data from cameras put in place at five of Des Moines' busiest and most dangerous intersections in 2011 show accidents down 33 percent compared to data from the previous four years. Des Moines Police Capt. Doug Harvey said while data for the city's relatively new program may be premature, he's seen firsthand the result speed cameras on Interstate 235 in particular have had on traffic.

"The amount of traffic weaving in and out on a day-to-day basis is so much better," Harvey said.

Year-end data from Cedar Rapids' program shows traffic crashes in the city down 22 percent, fatal crashes down 80 percent and crashes on Interstate 380 dropped significantly.

But Rogers and Rep. Ralph Watts, an Adel Republican, questioned the cameras' effectiveness and said they may violate civil liberties. Watts also asked whether cities may rely on the revenue the cameras provide.

"The question I have is, how far do you go to monitor the population with cameras?" Watts asked.

Conservative radio host Simon Conway, who presented 10,000 signatures to Gov. Terry Branstad last week in support of banning the devices, said data from the cities isn't conclusive and some reports are deceptive.

Branstad said then he'd sign a bill banning the devices.

-- Journal staff writer Molly Montag contributed to this report.

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