

Strict guidelines say where traffic cameras can go

FROM A1

A new law authorizing the use of the devices took effect in October 2023 in reaction to a spike in traffic-related deaths in the state: 366 in 2022 — the highest highway fatality rate in decades — compared to 302 in the previous year.

Connecticut last year became the 24th state to allow the use of red light cameras and the 19th legalizing speed cameras. A small number of states, including Maine and New Hampshire, expressly forbid the use of the cameras.

DOT spokesman Josh Morgan said in a perfect world, just the statistics showing “hundreds of people dying on roadways every year” would be enough to curb poor driving habits.

“Unfortunately, that’s not the case,” he said. “So, maybe a citation in the mail will open their eyes to the danger. When red light cameras are installed, they make those intersections safer.”

Morgan noted the state rolled-out a pilot program last year allowing for speed enforcement cameras in certain highway work zones, including along Interstate 95 in East Lyme, where a major reconstruction project is underway.

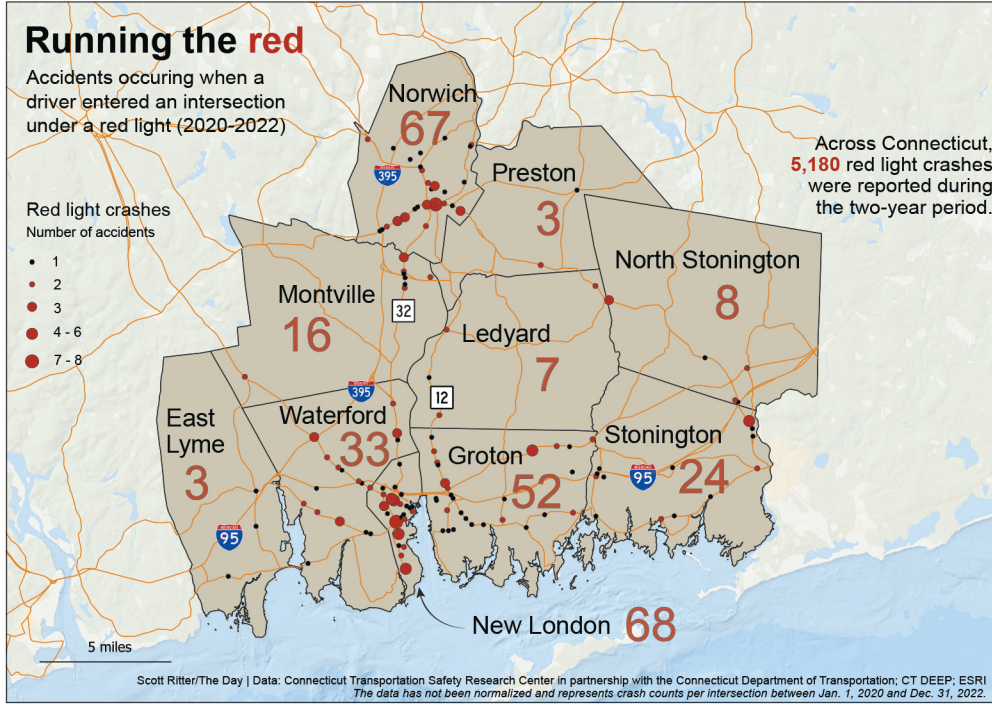
He said the program “made a difference” in curbing speeding.

The devices employ monitoring equipment to snap pictures of a vehicle’s license plate. In the case of speeding cameras, the photo is triggered when a vehicle is clocked going 10 miles faster than the posted speed limit. The other version alerts when a driver fails to stop at a red light.

In both cases, a ticket is mailed to the driver’s residence. Fines are levied at \$50 for a first offense and \$75 for subsequent violations. The citations are treated similarly to a parking ticket with no impact to insurance rates.

Adding to existing systems

There are currently two types of camera systems



widely in use by eastern Connecticut police departments: surveillance-style cameras — alternately described as “closed circuit television” or “public safety” cameras by police chiefs — and license plate readers.

Norwich police Chief Patrick Daley said this past week that each type of device provides police with an investigative tool, but in different ways. He said the plate readers — there are 23 in Norwich — are part of a passive system that only alerts when a violation has been detected.

“They’re not live; there’s no pan, tilt or zoom capabilities,” Daley said. “Though we do have the option of entering a query regarding a stolen car or one wanted in connection with a crime.”

For instance, if an alert is fielded by Norwich police that a certain make, model and color of a car has been flagged as being involved in a criminal activity, those taxonomies — or even a full license plate — can be entered by dispatchers, allowing the vehicle to be tracked via its progress past other readers in the city.

Daley said the ability of investigators to review the footage from live-feed cameras,

which are affixed at more than two dozen locations in the downtown, Greenville and Westside areas of Norwich, have proven useful in accident reconstruction and criminal investigations.

“There’s almost too many times to count when these cameras have proved useful,” he said. “We’ve seen large fights where people were tossing guns into bushes and car accidents showing under what circumstances a pedestrian was struck.”

But Daley said there has been no substantive city-level discussion yet on whether red light and speeding cameras should be added to the department’s visual toolbox.

“Though I do anticipate those discussions could happen in the next months,” he said. “One issue is the high threshold municipalities have to reach to install those devices.”

Location, selection and justification

Any town or city applying to add the new devices must first obtain DOT permission, a hurdle that requires providing written justification for each proposed location — including school and pedestrian

safety zones — to the Office of State Traffic Administration, or OSTA.

Applying towns are asked to consider traffic pattern and crash information related to every proposed camera location, as well as municipal poverty rates and traffic stop data.

For a device to be added at a traffic light, the municipality must show there were at least two crashes during a three-year period in which a driver failed to stop at a red light. No more than two camera systems will be allowed to be placed in census tracts identified as home to a substantial proportion of low-income residents.

For areas outside of school and pedestrian safety zones to be approved for a speed or red light camera, a municipality must show the roadway has a “history of speed related or speeding violations,” and provide documentation that such devices will improve safety at those locations, OSTA rules state.

Once a camera goes live, the host city or town must within 18 months submit a report to the DOT listing prior violations at an installation site, along with violations caught

on camera.

The report must also include a breakdown of revenue collected by the system delineated by the percentage of tickets issued to residents and non-residents.

A wait-and-see approach

Groton Town police Chief Louis J. Fusaro Jr. said he and Town Manager John Burt recently reviewed the new DOT rules on camera use and have decided to hold off on adding them on town roads.

“The program’s still in its infancy, and we’re not ready to go out on it yet,” he said. “I’m an old-school cop and prefer to use other education and enforcement components to change the habits of drivers.”

He said digital radar signs, like the one on Route 32 in New London that flashes a vehicle’s speed as they pass, are good reminder tools for drivers with a heavy foot on the gas pedal.

Fusaro said a “targeted” traffic enforcement campaign — which he said yields the best outcomes — typically begins by setting an officer up in a high-complaint area.

“You might issue written warnings the first week and later start issuing tickets,” he said. “With red light and speed cameras, you lose the interaction with the public, including the positive ones.”

Fusaro said he’s stopped violators for speeding or equipment issues, and instead of issuing a violation, has instead directed the driver to get a tail light fixed or to simply slow down.

“There’s no better feeling than to walk away from those encounters after being thanked,” he said.

New London police Chief Brian Wright said he, too, is taking a wait-and-see approach to red light and speed cameras.

“We’re in the assessing and evaluating stage until we can see how this all rolls out,” he said on Tuesday. “We want to learn from other municipalities that add these cameras and learn lessons from their outcomes. If there are hic-

cups, we don’t want to replicate them. We want to start above the curve.”

New London possesses “public safety” cameras and license plate readers. And while Wright praised the systems’ value as investigatory tools, he acknowledges critics’ “big brother” privacy concerns.

Wright said any approval of new types of cameras would require City Council approval and include prior public input. Daley said the same process would be required in Norwich.

Public testimony over the new legislation last year included an opposition letter from the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut citing due process and racial injustice concerns.

In an emailed statement, ACLU-CT Executive Director David McGuire said there are better ways to improve road safety than installing traffic cameras.

“Red light cameras result in increasing police surveillance, while ignoring real solutions and people’s actual safety needs,” he said. “We need to invest in walkable cities, not more policing. The ACLU-CT is opposed to the use of speed and red-light cameras because of the significant due process, privacy, and racial justice threats these cameras pose. We will be closely monitoring the roll-out of the new cameras and policies in the state.”

East Lyme police Chief Michael Finkelstein, whose town uses surveillance cameras overlooking public spaces and license plate readers, said his biggest concern regarding traffic cameras revolves around efficacy.

“If you put a speed camera on a road and people know where it is, they tend to just slow down right there and speed up when they pass it,” he said. “I’d rather have an officer out doing speed enforcement. It allows for more officer context, to determine if someone is driving impaired or with a suspended license.”

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