

Drivers' good behaviour hits hard on the pocket

Miami, which counted on \$10 million (R67m) in fines from motorists caught on camera skipping red lights, is planning to furlough some workers in part because penalties did not come close to forecasts as drivers began obeying the law.

Houston, where voters banned cameras in November, will receive about \$10m less than anticipated and faces a potential claim from supplier American Traffic Solutions for cancelling a contract. The Los Angeles Police Commission voted last month to let its agreement with American Traffic expire, citing the expense.

Since cameras began spying on motorists in the late 1980s they have faced lawsuits challenging their constitutionality, been banned in voter initiatives and restricted by legislation. That has not stopped US cities from deploying them. The number of municipalities with cameras has doubled to 539 since 2007, according to the Washington-based Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

"This is about money and not about safety," said Ted Hollander, a Fort Lauderdale attorney who defends people charged with traffic offenses.

Redflex Holdings, a South Melbourne, Australia-based camera supplier, successfully defended itself against lawsuits challenging its product in 10 states last year and legislation that would ban them in six, according to its annual report.

An Arizona employee of the company was shot and killed while monitoring a speed detecting camera in 2009. "Photo enforcement is very much a battleground," said Gary Biller, the executive director of the Wisconsin-based National Motorists Association.

The group's website lists 10 reasons for opposing cameras, including that vehicle owners who get tickets in the mail may be forced to snitch on friends or family who borrowed their car. Studies diverge on whether cameras, which have been endorsed by the World Health Organisation and the National Safety Council, actually reduce traffic accidents.

A September 2007 review by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration concluded that they reduced fatal side-angle collisions. It also said less serious rear-end collisions increased as drivers braked after spotting cameras.

"These cameras are never installed as revenue generators," Charles Territo, a spokesman for American Traffic said. "They are installed with the purpose of enhancing public safety."

Most contracts were "cost-neutral", Territo said. "A city will never pay more in fees than the cameras generate. If a camera is contracted at \$4 000 a month and it generates \$6 000, they pay \$4 000. But if the cameras generate \$2 000, they only pay that."

There were 28 class-action lawsuits in Florida against municipalities related to the cameras, said **Michael Popok, a partner with Weiss, Serota, Helfman, Pastoriza, Cole & Boniske**, who represents six cities. "If it was really about the money, we'd hide the cameras," he said. "There are big signs warning people that they're there."

The lawsuits had a "slightly chilling effect" on the rollout, leading to the lower revenue, said Amy Baker, the Florida legislature's chief economist. Territo disagreed, saying 80 communities in the state use cameras.

Miami planned for \$10m from 32 cameras installed this year. Instead, projected revenue was less than \$2m, mayor Tomas Regalado said. The shortfall will contribute to a \$15m projected fiscal 2012 budget deficit that may force the city to give employees unpaid days off one day a week.

Miami based its estimate on tickets issued at comparable intersections in other cities, Regalado said. Visibility of the cameras led to fewer violations, a 25 percent cut in accidents and less revenue. "They worked too well," Regalado said. A Houston judge ruled last month that the vote, where 53 percent of residents favoured stopping the cameras, was not valid and could not be used to end American Traffic's contract.

"Public opinion is awful on the cameras," Aaron Thomas, a marketing manager at Escort, said. "Everyone's looking for a solution to get around them (cameras)." – Bloomberg



A utility worker in a cherry-picker truck works on a traffic signal in Florida. Photo enforcement is a 'battleground' in the US. Photographer: Bloomberg News.