



Waterloo traffic cams nab 20,000

More than \$900,000 in fines paid over 1 year

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WATERLOO — The city's traffic cameras caught nearly 20,000 vehicles speeding or running red lights and generated more than \$900,000 in fine revenue in one year.



Trelka

More than half of the motorists said Police Chief Dan Trelka, who

mailed citations implemented the program with under the Waterloo City Council approval over the past two years. "But the bottom line is: I have no doubt that Waterloo's roads are safer because of this program." The Courier examined citations issued during the year ending Nov. 1, including fixed cameras at seven locations, hand-held speed cameras operated by police officers, and Jeep outfitted with cameras and

parked throughout the community to catch speeders. Records provided by the police department show 19,915 citations were issued during that 12-month period, including close to 17,000 for speed violations and nearly 3,000 for running red lights. The program didn't hit full swing until April, when the fixed cameras set up to catch vehicles going through red lights also were authorized to issue speeding citations. While the volume of citations may have been higher than Trelka expected, it pales in comparison to a similar system in Cedar Rapids. Records show Cedar Rapids issued more than 26,000 speeding citations in just the month of July this year, fueled primarily by fixed cameras on Interstate 380.

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Traffic cams

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"I was doing 30 to 40 (appeals) a month," Trelka said. "The standard I was using was the police office standing at the (vehicle) door."

While Trelka said he upheld 60 to 70 percent of the citations, he did drop some where motorists proved they were on a medical or other emergency. He noted he halved the fine for a low-income veteran who pleaded hardship and had an otherwise clean driving record.

Trelka, who is retiring this month, has handed the appeal duties off to a couple of sergeants who are "a little more rigid than I was" in upholding the citations.

Collections

Records from the city's finance department show paid automated traffic enforcement citations during the year ending Nov. 1, 2019, generated \$914,201. About \$543,069 went into city coffers while \$371,132 went to Sensys Gatsos, which receives \$36 from each paid citation to cover its cost of supplying and operating the system.

The City Council initially passed a resolution saying the revenue would be held for a full year and used in the next year's budget for "property tax relief." However, council members backtracked on the plan this year when \$240,000 in revenue was used early to plug a budget shortfall due to higher-than-expected

wage increases negotiated with city unions.

There was significant debate when Waterloo adopted the automated traffic enforcement program about whether vehicle owners were truly obligated to pay the fines because it is not legal to report unpaid amounts to credit ratings agencies.

The city also is unable to put holds on registration renewals for vehicles based on unpaid traffic camera citations. It is able to hold up registrations for unpaid parking tickets, which are similar citations issued to the owner and not neces-

sarily driver of a vehicle. Records show roughly 60 percent of the citations mailed by Sensys Gatsos are being paid currently. But Trelka expects the payment rates will increase soon.

The city adopted a "chronic nuisance vehicle" ordinance last year which will result in a municipal infraction ticket being issued in person by a police officer to vehicle owners cited three times in one year by a traffic camera. That is handled through the court system and carries higher fines.

Trelka said the city has also started using the state

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Police Chief Dan Trelka

income offset program to collect unpaid traffic camera fines. That program allows the city to put a hold on any state payments — including income tax returns and gaming winnings, for example — until a person settles unpaid balances with the city.

While there are no current plans for the city to add additional camera locations, Trelka said it may be necessary to shift the enforcement zones in the future based on crash data and changes in traffic patterns.

"My vision in implementing this program with fixed cameras, moving cameras, the hand-held cameras — was to have people driving in our city and constantly be wondering where that thing is today," he said. "I want them to think, 'I better check and see what the speed limit is.'"