

January 11, 2005 Tuesday

NAB VIOLATORS

OUR POSITION: CAMERAS SHOULD NOW BE PART OF EFFORT AGAINST RED-LIGHT RUNNING.

It's time for Florida to authorize using automated cameras to catch drivers who run red lights.

The cameras are needed because red-light running has become so widespread. Until now, police stakeouts have been the most common tactic to catch red-light runners. But they require an inordinate number of police. Florida law, however, does not allow red-light cameras, even though the devices have been effective elsewhere.

Nearly four years ago this newspaper objected to red-light cameras because they posed a conflict of interest. Some contractors who installed the cameras were collecting a commission based on the number of tickets issued. So if the number of red-light runners increased, they made more money. There were concerns that they were manipulating timing of yellow lights to catch more drivers.

A California law enacted last year shows how to address such concerns. The law bans commissions for the camera contractors and requires local governments to pay a flat fee to rent the equipment. That law also sets standards for timing the traffic lights to ensure that the yellow caution phase of the light isn't too short.

Gov. Jeb Bush and others have raised concerns that red-light cameras could violate the privacy of drivers. But established laws make clear that people out in public -- driving a car or engaged in other activities -- cannot expect privacy. Those who don't want their photo taken should not run red lights.

The automated cameras should be a part of a larger legislative package to fight red-light running. Other needed components include:

Increasing the penalty for red-light runners. Counties are required to collect only \$65 from red-light runners, though they are allowed to add a surcharge. But the required fine is way too low. Doubling it would not be out of line. The additional money could be used to help cash-strapped hospital trauma centers that care for car-crash victims. The Legislature has twice turned down this sensible change, which is critical to deterring violators.

Reclassify red-light running from careless driving to reckless driving. That change is needed to ensure that red-light runners who cause serious injuries or deaths can be criminally prosecuted.

State Rep. Andy Gardiner should be leading the charge for these reforms. He worked on this issue without success for two years. During the upcoming session he will be the House majority leader, so he certainly will have the juice to get things done. These reforms deserve the support of all lawmakers. The influential Florida Sheriffs Association and Florida Police Chiefs Association also should exert their political muscle on this effort.