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WIELD BIG STICK IT'S THE ONLY WAY TO CURB RED-LIGHT RUNNING

David D. Porter, Sentinel Columnist

Some people just don't get it.

Earlier this week, I was parked in front of a store at the corner of Goldenrod and Bates roads in east Orange County, and two cars zipped through the red light at that corner.

Since those red-light runners didn't care about the red light, I guess they probably didn't notice the makeshift memorial of flowers, teddy bears and sympathy cards left at that intersection.

That's the same corner where a young woman ran the red light on Oct. 27 and hit Anjelica Velez, 5, and her sister Victoria, 2. They were crossing the street with their mother. Both girls died.

That's the tragedy that I had been dreading. For two years, I have been ranting about red-light runners, ever since one slammed into my car at an intersection near downtown Orlando. Less than a year later, my boss was hit at a red light near the office. Several of my co-workers have been clobbered at that same intersection. I know at least a dozen other people, including lawyers, politicians, executives and even a police officer, who also have been hit by red-light runners. Most of them walked away badly shaken. At least one left in an ambulance but recovered later.

I've written about that subject so many times that some people sent me e-mails telling me they were tired of reading about the problem.

I wonder how those complainers felt when they read about the Velez sisters. It made me want to cry. The tragedy that took the lives of those two precious girls was entirely avoidable.

Despite all the ink I've invested in this issue, the problem hasn't gotten better. It's actually worse.

A year ago, it was pretty common to see one driver run a stop light at a busy intersection. Now it's become common to see two or three drivers run a red light together. Red-light running isn't some team sport. It's as dangerous as firing a pistol into a crowd. Those who routinely run red lights are bound to have a major wreck -- sooner or later.

Taming this red-light running epidemic will require a cultural change in this community.

The police are the agents of that change. I know many police agencies launch periodic crackdowns on red-light runners. But that's not enough.

Forget about the carrot and stick approach. To fix this, only the stick will work.

I propose a multiagency task force, with representatives of every police department in this region. The idea would be to have maybe a dozen squads spread out across this region every day and all they would do is hammer red-light runners.

From what I've seen, the most effective red-light enforcement operations are more than a one-person job. The law requires that officers be able to testify in traffic court that they saw the light turn red and that they could see the front wheels of the car cross the intersection after the light changed. To see all that and then catch up to the red-light runner is very difficult.

Stakeouts that require the participation of several officers are most effective, but are labor intensive. In the stakeout operation, there is one officer who spots the violators and then radios to colleagues farther down the road who stop the red-light runners and write tickets. The task-force operation would ensure that smaller agencies that don't have enough officers on duty to run red-light operations could participate.

Police already know which intersections are the worst. It would be like hunting over a baited field. The idea though is to keep motorists guessing. Nobody would ever know where these squads would show up. And every day they would be giving out hundreds -- that's right hundreds -- of tickets.

The whole idea is to create an atmosphere where everybody who drives will know somebody -- a family member, co-worker or the guy across the street -- who got a ticket for red-light running. Will it make a lot of people angry, drive up some drivers' insurance premiums and cause people to spend time in court when they should be working?

You bet -- on all those counts.

But here is the flip side. That type of enforcement -- yeah, it's heavy handed -- will force all of us to pay a lot more attention when driving.

Here are a few more things that we can do to attack this problem:

If you see a professional driver -- a bus driver, truck driver, or someone operating a marked vehicle -- run a red light, call the company or employer. Of course, you need to have the vehicle's tag number or other information to identify the driver.

I've called companies many times complaining about red-light runners. Big outfits, such as the package-express companies, take reckless-driver reports very seriously.

Put pressure on lawmakers to increase the penalty for red-light running. Under existing law, someone who runs a red light in Orange County faces a fine of \$112.50. Many speeders have to pay bigger fines. Red-light running is much more dangerous than speeding. I still think a fine of \$300 for red-light running is a small price to pay considering the danger that it causes. Take the money from those enhanced fines and use it to pay for hospital trauma centers. A plan to increase fines, though not as high as I propose, fizzled during the legislative session earlier this year. That issue needs to be back on the table for next year's session.

I'm certain that the parents of the Velez sisters are still trying to make sense out of those deaths. No doubt they'll think about it for the rest of their lives. I have no answer for them, either, except to keep hammering on this issue. Those two girls should not be dead. As a community, we have a responsibility to do everything we can to stop red-light runners.