

**Doubled fine may slow up Florida's red-light runners
It may curb the problem but isn't seen as a complete fix.**

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Palm Beach Post West Palm Beach

By Chuck McGinness

Palm Beach County sheriff's Sgt. Paul Vrchota has heard it all from motorists he has pulled over for dashing through a red light.

"I'm late for work."

"I've got to go to the bathroom."

"I have a sick baby at home."

"I just broke up with my boyfriend and have to get out of town."

Vrchota says of the excuses tossed his way: "Imagination is the only limit."

The creative thinking of lead-footed drivers who try to zip through the yellow light at a busy intersection and don't quite make it — or those who blatantly blow through a red light — will have to get a little better.

On Saturday, fines for running a red light will more than double statewide. The new penalty will be \$183.50 in Palm Beach and St. Lucie counties, \$180.50 in Martin County.

The higher fine is expected to raise an estimated \$600,000 this fiscal year. The money will go to trauma centers, where many victims of car crashes are treated.

Drivers running red lights kill about 1,000 people in the United States annually. Will increasing the fines reduce the nation's leading cause of urban crashes? Police and lawmakers say it should slow the problem, but it's not the best solution.

"Anything we can do to reduce their urge to run red lights has got to help," said Vrchota, the sheriff's sergeant.

State Rep. Irv Slosberg, D-Boca Raton, agreed that the higher fines will make drivers think a little harder.

"People will get the message if it costs more money," said Slosberg, a leading advocate for highway safety. "But quite honestly, the only way to make a difference is photo enforcement."

A report published in April by the Federal Highway Administration found that cameras significantly decreased serious side-angle crashes, but also significantly increased rear-end collisions.

For several years, Florida lawmakers have debated the idea of allowing cameras at intersections to catch red-light violators. A photograph of a vehicle's license plate, along with a citation, would be sent to the owner.

The idea has consistently been beaten back by legislators who say using technology to catch scofflaws smacks of Big Brother.

Privacy concerns aside, opponents such as Greg Mauz, a Delray Beach activist with the National Motorists' Association, said red-light cameras are a money grab by camera companies and the cities that hire them.

"Raising the fine is OK," Mauz said. "It's certainly better than cameras."

According to the federal highway agency, it's impossible to develop a profile of a typical red-light runner. Last year, nearly 333,000 drivers in Florida were ticketed for running a light.

A survey compiled by Old Dominion University of motorists in 10 states, including Florida, asked what should be done to stop the dangerous practice. Surprisingly, 23.1 percent said nothing. Other suggestions were better educational programs (15.2 percent), increased police enforcement (14.2 percent), higher fines (13.1 percent) and photo enforcement (11.5 percent).

State lawmakers' opposition to photo enforcement is not stopping two cities from moving ahead with the idea. Pembroke Pines in Broward County and Gulf Breeze in the Panhandle are planning to install cameras and issue civil violations.

But Attorney General Charlie Crist has said the cities are overstepping their authority. State law prohibits municipalities from adopting local ordinances that turn a criminal offense such as running a red light into a civil infraction, Crist wrote in an August opinion.

Mauz points to a Texas Transportation Institute study that found extending the yellow light an additional second produced a 53 percent reduction in violations and a 40 percent reduction in crashes. "Cameras are not a substitute for proper engineering," said Mauz, a professional truck driver.

A University of Central Florida research report released this month supports the position that engineering alternatives are effective. Using a simulator to monitor drivers' reactions, researchers concluded that better street markings — such as SIGNAL AHEAD painted on the asphalt near the intersection — cut red-light collisions by 74 percent.

The study also found that most instances of red-light running occurred within the first second of the signal changing from yellow to red. Drivers in the test said they ran the light 54 percent of the time because the yellow was too short.

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