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(Cover Page)

Police Committee mulls red-light cameras

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Lower Merion Township is taking a flashing-yellow-light approach to Pennsylvania's new red-light camera law. It is proceeding with caution.

The board of commissioners heard enough to like in a Police Committee meeting Oct. 3, however, to ask Superintendent Michael McGrath to find out more.

In a report, McGrath said the state legis-

lature passed the law, HB 254, in July, extending the option of installing cameras at accident-heavy intersections to ticket motorists who run red lights. Previously, only Philadelphia had been authorized to use the devices. The city of Pittsburgh and some municipalities in four Philadelphia suburban counties are now eligible.

The authorization applies to Montgomery, Chester, Delaware and Bucks counties. To participate, municipalities must have populations of at least 20,000 and have an accredited police

department. Lower Merion Township meets those criteria.

To implement an "automated red-light enforcement system," the municipality would have to pass an ordinance and apply to the state Department of Transportation. PennDOT would also have the final say in determining which intersections would get the cameras. Eligible intersections would be identified based on crash data, "not on traffic volume," McGrath said.

See CAMERAS, Page 12.

Thursday, October 11, 2012

MAIN LINE TIMES/MainLineMediaNews.com

Page 131

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CAMERAS, from Page One

The law sets the upper limit of the fine for violations at \$100, but municipalities would have discretion to set a lower fine. No points are placed on a driver's record for a violation.

McGrath also provided results from several studies of the use of red-light cameras locally and nationally. Philadelphia, which was authorized to start a pilot program in 2005 focusing on accident-prone Roosevelt Boulevard and has expanded it to include 96 intersections, has reported a 25-percent decrease in what McGrath termed right-angle crashes, "T-bone" collisions that can produce the most serious or fatal injuries.

At the same time, it has seen a 15-percent increase in rear-end collisions at those intersections, typically caused when a driver, aware of the red-light camera, stops, but the driver behind him does not.

Studies by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety and the Federal Highway Administration produce almost identical data.

Improving traffic safety — and saving lives — is the driving force for implementing red-light camera systems, but a first question Lower

Merion commissioners had was, "What does it cost?"

McGrath said, from his research, capital costs to the township should be minimal. Lower Merion would contract with a vendor to install and maintain the cameras. Administrative costs would also be deducted from violation revenues. However, municipalities that implement the systems would not receive any other funds directly from the fines.

Revenues above the vendor and administrative costs would go to the state, to be deposited in a restricted receipts account, and could be used only for a transportation-enhancement grants program.

Grants would be awarded on a competitive basis for intersection improvements, McGrath said. If Lower Merion participates, it would be given some priority to receive a grant, but the money would also be available to any jurisdiction across Pennsylvania.

McGrath said that, in a preliminary review, between 12 and 15 intersections in Lower Merion Township might qualify for PennDOT's approval to install cameras. A number of intersections on Lancaster Avenue could qualify, as

well as "a couple on City Avenue," he said. Commissioners were immediately able to name some others that they would like to add to a list.

In going over the somewhat mixed results of red-light camera initiatives elsewhere, he told commissioners there seems to be an extended benefit. "People start to realize [red-light cameras] are in place, and they adjust their behavior at all intersections."

"That comment alone is persuasive to me, that we should learn more about it," responded Commissioner Scott Zelov.

Commissioners had other questions.

Would installing cameras interfere with the new closed-loop traffic-signal systems recently installed on Lancaster and Montgomery avenues? "The camera doesn't affect that. It's just recording what's going on in the intersection," McGrath said.

What crash data specifically support installing cameras at an intersection? PennDOT would focus, McGrath said, on personal-injury crashes.

Commissioner Brian Gordon remarked that there is a constitutional issue, to an extent, involved in the red-light camera debate, one that, in various parts of the country, has been supported as passing muster. Use of the cameras represents "an invasion of privacy rights ... to a

degree," he said, but added that it is "a very narrowly drawn intrusion," one that he could support for its safety benefits.

On that point, McGrath emphasized that the cameras cannot be used for surveillance, only to monitor traffic through an intersection.

Having seen the matter on the board's agenda, several residents had called her to encourage learning more about using a red-light camera system, Commissioner Cheryl Gelber said. "I would fully support exploring" the township's options, she said.

Other commissioners the night of Oct. 3 agreed they wanted to hear more.

"What comes next?" Commissioner George Manos wanted to know.

McGrath said he would direct his department's Traffic Safety Unit to look into a program. The township would identify vendors who supply and operate the cameras. He said he would also want to "nail down any out-of-pocket costs" and learn more about how penalties for violations would be administered.

Then, he said, he would bring the matter back to the board for a decision whether to put a contract out for bid.

How long would all that take?

McGrath said he believed the study could be finished before the end of 2012.