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Nassau County, N.Y., Sees Spike in Red-Light Camera Revenues

According to a report released by the county, 2016 revenues from the 86 traffic cameras generated 505,089 tickets and totaled roughly \$48.5 million — nearly \$15 million more than 2015.

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(TNS) — Revenue from Nassau County, N.Y.'s red-light camera program jumped nearly 44 percent in 2016 compared with the year before, and the number of crashes in all major categories, including those with injuries, also rose, according to a new county report.

County officials said an increase in 2016 to the “Driver Responsibility” fee, from \$30 to \$45, likely boosted the amount of money generated from the program — marking the first time since 2012 that camera revenue grew.

The fee, which pays for issuing, processing and adjudicating violations, is among several penalties that have brought the cost of red-light camera violations to \$150 each. The funds collected are deposited into the county’s general fund, officials said.



In 2016, red-light cameras at 86 intersections countywide produced 505,089 tickets that generated \$48.5 million in fines and administrative and late fees, according to the report.

In 2015, when Nassau had cameras at 84 intersections, the program generated 487,298 tickets and \$33.7 million in fees and fines, the data show.

“The ticket fee is meant to deter drivers from reckless and dangerous driving. The additional fees are appropriate based on the work necessary to process tickets,” said Michael Martino, spokesman for Nassau County Executive Laura Curran.



Nassau and Suffolk counties, as mandated by state law, release annual reports that include revenue and crash data at intersections with red-light cameras.

Nassau's new report analyzes crash data gathered by the state Transportation Department for 2016. Red-light cameras, which are installed 50 to 150 feet before the stop line of an intersection, capture digital still images and video of a driver and automatically issue violations.

The report showed that compared with 2015 at red-light camera intersections:

- Total accidents increased 8.42 percent, to 1,764.
- Accidents with injuries rose 6.8 percent, to 563.
- Rear-end crashes increased 10.8 percent, to 785.
- Side-impact crashes rose 11.7 percent, to 782.

Officials in Nassau and Suffolk say the red-light camera program, which began in both counties in 2009, is aimed at boosting safety by penalizing motorists who do not slow down and stop at red lights.

Safety, or a money grab?

Critics, including some Nassau and Suffolk lawmakers, call the programs a money grab designed to boost revenue.

The last time revenue from the program grew — in 2012, when there was a 60 percent increase — was after Nassau added 11 camera intersections. Annual revenue had declined or stayed flat until 2016.

Suffolk County last month said its red-light camera program generated \$30.9 million in 2016, about the same as in 2015.

Curran, a Democrat who took office Jan. 1, has proposed raising fees for red-light camera violations by 2 percent to help close a possible \$105 million budget deficit. Her proposal also would raise the Driver Responsibility fee by \$5 to a total of \$50, Martino said.

The plan, which would require approval by the GOP-controlled legislature, has sparked opposition from Republicans and Democrats.

“The whole purpose of the program is to improve safety at these intersections,” said Presiding Officer Richard Nicoletto (R-New Hyde Park). “The fees are too high. I would like to see them peeled back as soon as we can do so, without causing a budget crisis in the county.”

Democratic Minority Leader Kevan Abrahams (D-Freeport), who has called the program “a money grab” in legislative meetings, also said he opposes a 2 percent increase.

“I think the fine is too excessive,” Abrahams said. “I thought it was fair when it was at \$95 but now we are at \$150 and I don’t think it is fair. The increases that have been used by the Republican majority in the legislature and the previous county executive to balance the budget have been done on the backs of residents in Nassau County.”

...s were \$50 per ticket in 2009, \$65 in 2011, \$80 in 2012 and now are \$95, including

the \$45 driver responsibility fee, but not including the \$55 “public safety fee” that was imposed by the Nassau County Legislature as of Jan. 2, 2017.

Public safety experts have credited red-light camera programs with reducing the most serious collisions. In 2016, there were no reported fatalities at any of Nassau’s red-light camera intersections, the report shows.

The State Legislature authorized 50 camera locations each for Nassau and Suffolk in 2009. In 2012, state lawmakers allowed each county to add 50 sites. Suffolk finished installation of its full allotment of cameras in 2014. Nassau has red-light cameras in place at 86 intersections.

Nassau County officials say they are examining why the 2016 data show an uptick in crashes.

Christopher Mistrion, Nassau’s traffic safety coordinator, who collects data for the reports, says officials are “just beginning to run more numbers” to find out what might have caused the year-over-year rise in crashes.

Accidents could be up at all county intersections, not just those with red-light cameras, due to increased traffic volume, weather or engineering issues such as the timing of yellow lights, Mistrion said.

“I personally don’t believe the uptick is a result of the red-light cameras,” Mistrion said. “Every effort has been made to make sure that safety is the priority at the locations of the red-light cameras.”

Is the program working?

But if the number of crashes at intersections is up, it could also mean the red-light camera program might not be working as well as a public safety measure, experts say.

“The red-light camera is only one among other tools that can improve safety. They are only good [when] installed after a good engineering analysis,” said Dominique Lord, professor in the Zachry Department of Civil Engineering at Texas A&M University. “If it increases crashes, it means they are not working, and that tool does not work.”

Lord, who has studied traffic safety programs in cities including Chicago and Quebec City, Canada, said there always will be variations in year-to-year accident tallies. The best data would come from studies of the same intersections for three to five years.

“It’s possible that if you collect the same data for those sites next year that you will see a slight reduction,” Lord said. “The more years you have, the better the data. We are looking for the long-term mean.”

Nassau’s annual report of the red-light camera program compares the number of accidents at intersections with cameras for a 12-month period against the number of accidents before installation of the cameras.

By that measure, accidents in every major category were down in 2016. Total crashes declined by 26 percent, crashes with injuries were down by 39 percent, head-on collisions declined by 84 percent, rear-end accidents were down 34 percent and side-impact collisions declined by 1 percent, according to the 2016 report.

As in previous years, red-light cameras at the intersection of Old Country Road and Ring Road near Roosevelt Field Mall in Garden City generated the most red-light camera violations: 29,245 in 2016. The intersection of Community Drive and North Service Road in Lake Success ranked second, with 25,896 tickets.

American Traffic Solutions, the Arizona-based company that operates Nassau’s camera system, was paid \$9.3 million in 2016, up from \$8 million in 2015.

NASSAU RED LIGHT CAMERA PROGRAM

Revenues

2016: \$48.5 million

2015: 33.7 million

Accidents

Total, 2016: 2016:1,764 (8.4 percent increase from 2015)

Accidents with injuries: 563 (6.8 percent increase)

Rear end: 785 (10.8 percent increase)

Side impact: 782 (11.7 percent increase)

Source: 2016-2017 Program Review Report, Nassau County Red Light Camera Program.

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