

April 18, 2003

The Hon. David Cicilline  
Mayor  
Providence City Hall  
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Mayor Cicilline:

I am writing in response to news reports this week about your proposal to raise revenue for the city by installing so-called "red light cameras" at various intersections in the city. While installation of such cameras may in fact prove a financial boon to both the city and the struggling company that manufactures this equipment, we urge you to reconsider and reject this particular means of creative fundraising.

Let me begin by acknowledging your candor in touting the cameras as a revenue-enhancing measure for the city. In other communities where these cameras have made their debut, the stated rationale has always been that the cameras are installed to promote safety. Most people, of course, quickly see through that rationale. In fact, most studies have failed to show any safety benefit from installation of these cameras. Rather, there are far more obvious and effective ways of dealing with the problem -- such as increasing the time of yellow lights in dangerous intersections.

To the extent the city becomes financially addicted to these devices, however, it actually has the effect of discouraging the implementation of engineering solutions that would, in fact, make intersections more safe for motorists. In any event, in light of the consequences of moving violations to motorists caught in the "red light camera" web -- increased insurance costs, for example -- a money-raising rationale is a troubling one.

More to the point, the installation of these cameras raises troubling privacy and due process concerns. Presently, when one receives a traffic violation, a motorist is, of course, made immediately aware of the violation by the officer who provides the ticket. With red light cameras, however, it may be weeks before a person is given notification of a citation, making his or her ability to challenge it much harder. In addition, the system is based on the imperfect assumption that the driver of the car and the person to whom the car is registered are one and the same, as tickets are issued based on car registration information. In many instances, of course, this assumption is not true, but the owner of the car will nonetheless be forced to pay. At a minimum, the burden of proof falls on him or her to prove he or she was not driving at the time, an overturning of the bedrock principle regarding the presumption of innocence.

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While the invasion of privacy occasioned by this system may seem minor, any implementation of a system that leads to the widespread installation of cameras in a city

cannot be ignored or minimized. As surveillance cameras of any kind become more ubiquitous, a further desensitization of privacy rights is inevitable. Frankly, there is more than a little irony in having Providence gravitate towards video surveillance for *any* reason, coming so soon after the Providence public safety complex scandal involving the unauthorized audio surveillance of thousands of residents.

Finally, we must note the troubling private-public connection with red light camera systems. In most instances, the private company responsible for the cameras gets a “kickback” for every ticket issued. It is thus in their best interest – as well as the City’s – to have people running red lights. This is precisely the opposite of what the City’s goal should be – ensuring better safety at dangerous intersections. Indeed, in some other municipalities where these systems were installed, litigation discovered that traffic intersections were specifically chosen where, for example, yellow lights were shorter, in order to catch more people. This is hardly an appropriate way to enforce traffic laws.

We recognize the serious financial situation which the City faces. But as you aptly noted, it is time for the City to stop relying on gimmicks to deal with the city’s fiscal problems. However, we believe that the use of red-light cameras would be yet another gimmick, but one that both erodes, in subtle ways, our basic rights and turns on its head the major rationale for traffic safety laws.

For all these reasons, we hope you will direct your revenue-raising efforts to other activities and venues. Thank you in advance for your attention to our views.

Sincerely,

Steven Brown  
Executive Director

cc: Providence City Council