

Photo radar: Coming soon to a road near you

Regina Mayor Pat Fiocco officially announced he will “push hard” to accomplish his new goal. No, that goal is not to fill potholes and cut taxes. Instead, Fiocco wants to install photo radar cameras on Regina roads. If he successfully lobbies the province to legalize photo radar, speed cameras will appear across the province.



The politicians say photo radar is all about making our roads and highways safer. And sure enough, it starts out that way. But the lure of easy cash for municipalities and police forces soon overwhelms any interest in public safety.

Case in point: The City of Winnipeg. Just a few short months ago the city announced a plan to add four more photo radar vans and 12 more stationary cameras. They aren't adding to the fleet to see more safety benefits. Rather, they're adding units to make up a \$49 million budget shortfall.

Winnipeg city Councilor Gord Steeves, chairman of the protection committee, admitted the plan was all about cash. Steeves told the Winnipeg Sun he's tired of saying otherwise: “We've spent a lot of time over the last five years trying to spin this like [photo radar cameras and revenues for city hall] aren't related. They certainly are related.”

This is what inevitably happens with photo radar – public safety takes a back seat to more money for city hall. Initially you might see a camera, visibly marked by a sign, in a school zone or construction area. Then the cameras are installed on wide-open freeways with no signage. Next thing you know they have non-descript white vans tagging speeders where speed limits change.

The vast majority of drivers fined by photo radar are careful and responsible drivers. The number one cause of traffic fatalities is impaired driving and photo radar does nothing to stop that. In fact, tickets aren't necessarily sent to the driver. The registered owner of the vehicle, regardless of who is driving it at the time, is responsible for paying the fine.

Communities that adopt photo radar programs ultimately find themselves in a conflict of interest. If they achieve their goal of slowing people down revenue from the cameras begins to drop. By this time, municipalities are dependent on the revenue stream the cameras provide (mostly off the backs of safe and responsible drivers, by the way). The only alternative is for the city to install more cameras in areas where public safety is not the main concern, but where drivers are likely to modestly exceed posted limits.

There are a couple ways around this conflict of interest. One way would be to send all revenues collected from cameras to a provincial fund to assist victims of crime. This would ensure police and city officials are installing cameras only for public safety reasons and not for the money. Another idea is to refund the revenues to drivers with clean driving records every year.

Ironically, Fiocco's “big push” for photo radar comes on a day when red light cameras in Regina are shown to be a dismal failure. Regina Police Service, in a report to the Board of Police Commissioners, admits that they haven't seen a marked reduction in the number of accidents at intersections with red light cameras. In fact, one prominent intersection showed a 90 per cent increase in rear-end collisions. Turns out that people slamming on their brakes to avoid a red light infraction are being hit from behind by drivers not as quick to slow down.

There is evidence that photo radar, if used responsibly, can reduce the frequency of traffic accidents and more evidence showing it increases the size of government coffers. If the province chooses to appease the municipalities and legalize photo radar, it must set down some ground rules.

All photo radar locations must be clearly marked for all to see and fair warning given. It should be made clear in legislation that speed cameras are intended for public safety and not for government revenues. All revenues should be directed to the province's general revenues and reimbursed to safe drivers or to victims of crime in the province.

Finally, Mayor Fiacco should put a package of these proposals together and hold a referendum in conjunction with municipal elections this fall. Fasten your seatbelts, Saskatchewan.

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