



CITY OF MUSCATINE PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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EXCESSIVE SPEED IS THE CRITICAL PROBLEM

DOT evaluations focus on red-light running, crashes rather than speeding issues

MUSCATINE, Iowa – Most of the opposition to the deployment and use of Automated Traffic Enforcement (ATE) devices has centered on red-light violations. In fact, a recent article in the Muscatine Journal pointed that out by listing several options suggested by the Iowa Department of Transportation (IDOT) that are available to reduce the number of red-light violations. Notice that the presumption is in reducing the number of red-light violations and not in reducing speeding violations, modifying driver behavior, or prevention of accidents.

The Iowa Department of Transportation (IDOT) also puts their emphasis on the number of red-light violations and accidents at specific locations when reviewing ATE Enforcement Reports from municipalities. If the number of accidents is low, an ATE is needed. If the number of accidents is steady or rising an ATE is not needed. There is little in their analysis of ATE data on speeding or red-light violations.

For Muscatine and most municipalities that created ordinances to allow the use of ATE's within their boundaries, the main issue is excessive speeds. Another ongoing issue (or battle) is the state (IDOT) telling municipalities what they can and cannot do when it comes to a community's public safety (as well as other topics). This is known as "Home Rule" which recently marked 50 years as law in Iowa.

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In the most recent evaluation of ATEs, the 2016 ATE Enforcement Report to IDOT for the City of Muscatine acknowledges that the City of Muscatine uses ATE systems to enforce red-light running and speed violations at four (previously five) signalized intersections on the primary highway system.

Just eight percent of Iowa's state roadway system is designated as part of the primary highway system which includes interstate highways, United States highways, and Iowa state highways. In Muscatine, this system includes U.S. 61 and Iowa 22, 38, and 92.

Iowa DOT cites two reports, a 2012 Iowa State University report titled "Toolbox of Countermeasures to Reduce Red Light Running" and a 2008 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) report on the causation of crashes in the United States, to lay the foundation for basing their evaluation on the number of crashes.

The westbound approach to the City of Muscatine on U.S. 61 was guarded by an ATE system that, at present, is only permitted to record the number of red-light and speeding violations. This system is the only one of the five systems located on the state maintained primary highway system in Muscatine that the IDOT determined needed to be removed.

In their evaluation, IDOT cites that crashes have increased or stayed about the same since the camera was installed, there are a high number of speed violations, and the camera is within 1,000 feet of a lower speed limit as the reasons for the administrative order to remove the camera.

The City of Muscatine appealed the opinion based on the fact that IDOT engineered the approach and signage placement, and installed the signs where IDOT said the signs needed to be. Despite appeals from the City of Muscatine, IDOT has refused to move the signs to be in compliance with the Primary Highway System Automated Traffic Enforcement Guidelines that

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became an administrative rule in 2014. No state law corresponds to or supports this administrative rule and IDOT continues to refuse to move the signs or allow the city to move the signs.

“The ATE system at this approach was installed for speed enforcement,” Phil Sargent, assistant police chief for the City of Muscatine, said. “Crashes were not the factor in this decision. This is a portal to a major business district in the city and, as such, the reckless habits of speeders created a major hazard to the business, their employees, their consumers, and our residents.”

Steve Gent, director of the IDOT Office of Traffic and Safety, told the Muscatine Journal that the reason IDOT would not move the signs is because the public would think that IDOT was in cahoots with the city.

“We don’t want it to look like the DOT is making it easier for drivers to get more tickets,” Gent told the Journal.

Gent also forgets to inform the Journal that the signals on the primary highway system are the jurisdiction of IDOT. However, the State of Iowa and the City of Muscatine have concurrent jurisdiction when it comes to enforcement of the law, and that means while it is the state’s road, the city has the right to enforce traffic laws and make public safety determinations. In fact, the City is the main enforcement authority.

Whatever countermeasures the City believes would make these intersections safer for the citizens of Muscatine has to be approved by IDOT along with IDOT providing assistance in engineering and implementation of the suggested changes.

“The city would simply like people to obey the law, stop driving at excessive speeds and risking the well-being of the public,” Gregg Mandsager, city administrator for the City of Muscatine,

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said. “As much as IDOT wants to make this about money and red lights, this is about public safety more than anything else. Muscatine has reasonable standards and has used these ATE fines responsibly to enhance our community’s public safety.”

So why the emphasis on a 2012 report on red-light violation countermeasures?

Gent is one of a new generation of IDOT senior staff that that has turned an organization that once fully supported the deployment and operation of ATEs into an organization that is against the deployment and use of ATEs. This has become a political issue rather than a public safety issue.

“We cannot and should not politicize public safety,” Kevin Jenison, communications manager for the City of Muscatine, said. “And public safety decisions are best made at the local level.”

Gent is not swayed by the argument of local control even though he suggests that there is local control of what countermeasures are and are not used for intersections on state maintained roadways.

“The point is that there are always more than one safety countermeasure,” Gent told the Journal. “And that’s why, at the Iowa DOT, we are always about doing an evaluation, making sure it is done right, and that we are looking at all the alternatives out there.”

But the countermeasures Gent promotes are for reducing the number of red-light violations, not decreasing or modifying excessive speeding which is one of the leading causes of accidents. Gent also makes it clear that it is the city’s responsibility to deploy these countermeasures, with the blessing of IDOT.

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“The Iowa Department of Transportation was a big supporter of using ATEs when we decided to pursue the option,” Sargent said. “IDOT engineered and approved the approaches with suggestions from the city, and installed the signs on the approach.”

The City of Muscatine also went the further step by installing “Traffic Laws Photo Enforced” signs on every corporate limit sign posts on roadways entering Muscatine.

One of the countermeasures stated in the article suggests that changing the length of the yellow light will reduce the number of red-light running violations. The minimum timing permitted by IDOT is 3.5 seconds while Muscatine Power and Water, who maintains the traffic signals in Muscatine, has the yellow light set at a minimum of 4.3 seconds which means that all ATE signals are in compliance and meet standards.

“The yellows on the bypass are even longer,” Sargent said.

Even with a longer yellow light, a 2013 study by the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration found that excessively long yellow (or amber) lights encourage red-light running which is inconsistent with the data being publicized by the state and the Journal.

Longer yellow time could encourage red-light running as drivers adapt to, disregard, or consider the longer yellow time as part of the green light cycle according to the study. Excessively long signal lights can also encourage red-light running because drivers do not want to have to wait several minutes for the next green interval.

The Journal article also talked about an all-red clearance interval, a process where for several seconds the lights are all-red allowing traffic to clear the intersection before a change in traffic flow. Currently this type of countermeasure is in general use.

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Advanced warning flashers is another countermeasure that can be used to warn drivers of a light change. On primary highway systems, such as U.S. 61 that is controlled by IDOT the engineering and placement of these flashers is the jurisdiction of IDOT, not the city.

Gent told the Journal that IDOT always believed that warning flashers would be good for the westbound approach to University Drive. What he did not say was that IDOT ruled against placing warning flashers in that approach as they would not be needed in the absence of the camera.

IDOT did install a warning flasher in the eastbound lane of U.S. 61 approaching Isett.

Another countermeasure suggested by the 2012 study and IDOT is the placement of speed feedback signs. If you have driven on University Drive you have seen these mobile units that flash your speed and tell you to slow down if you are driving over the posted speed limit. Many drivers do slow down but there are also many who disregard the devices since there is no enforcement tool to their use.

Study after study has shown that of all countermeasures available to modify driver behavior, reduce speeding violations, reduce red-light violations, and prevent increases in personal injury and non-personal injury accidents, ATEs are the most efficient and least costly enforcement tool to use.

Critics suggest that ATEs are just another revenue stream for municipalities, which, although true, is not the reason that Muscatine or most other municipalities sought the installation of ATE systems.

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“Public safety is the priority,” Sargent said. “That is accomplished by driver modification created by the knowledge of the ATE presence and by allowing uniformed officers to be elsewhere in the city to assist citizens.”

Are the traffic cameras having any effect on the driving habits of area drivers? Sargent believes so.

“After looking at the statistics for citations and crashes for the time the ATE systems have been installed and running, we believe it is clear that they are,” Sargent said. “We continue to have less crashes at these intersections than the year prior to implementation.”

Even the targeted intersection at University Drive has seen reductions in speed violations, at least until the camera’s ability to create citation packages was turned off. The ATE system went online in March 2011 with 12,857 speed violations recorded in the eight and a half month time span. Violations were down to 5,999 in 2016. Prior to the camera being turned off in April 2017, the number of speed violations was on pace to be the lowest in the nine-years that the city has been keeping statistics. With the camera off, the number soared to the highest (over 19,000).

The City of Muscatine was attempting to work with the Journal in response to the reporter’s effort to push the IDOT agenda by using the 2012 Iowa State University report. While the immediate demands of the reporter could not be met, he was offered a chance to sit down with several staff members with specific knowledge of the ATE systems, the rules and regulations, and the history of the system in Muscatine.

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