

Cameras clear legal roadblock

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PORT RICHEY - Last year, the City of Port Richey activated a camera at the intersection of U.S. 19 and Ridge Road. The intersection had one of the highest accident rates in Pasco County.

"Highway 19 is a very dangerous road," said Port Richey Police Chief Dave Brown.

According to Brown, many of the accidents were caused by people running red lights. The camera began catching cars running the red lights in three south bound lanes.

"We have had a reduction in accidents and injuries. If a camera makes you a better driver so be it," Brown said flatly.

There were plans to put up more cameras at the same intersection, but there was a problem; the Florida Attorney General issued an opinion questioning the legality of the cameras. The impact of the opinion was to limit the cameras to private property.

Cities had to create ordinances to issue the tickets from cameras mounted on private property. In Port Richey, three property owners objected to the installation of cameras, thus the lone camera remained focused on the south bound lanes only.

But now a new bill, passed by a House and Senate committee in Tallahassee, would permit the cameras to be placed on public rights of way.

"It's cash register justice," criminal defense attorney Jason Melton complains. "They're not interested in who is running the red light, just getting the money."

Melton is to a certain extent correct. The driver is not necessarily ticketed. The camera reads a tag number as a car passes through a red light. The person connected to that license plate gets the citation.

"If this was about public safety, they would be interested in who is running the red light," Melton said. He points out while it may be considered an ordinance violation, people still have a due process right which Melton contends is denied by using the cameras.

Port Richey wants to install more cameras. If the bill passes the full House and Senate, and is signed by the Governor, a camera could be coming to an intersection near you.

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