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Senator Don DeFronzo
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Co-Chairs, Transportation Committee
Legislative Office Building
Hartford, CT 06106

Written Testimony for S. B. No. 345 (COMM): AN ACT AUTHORIZING MUNICIPALITIES TO CONDUCT A PILOT PROGRAM FOR THE USE OF AUTOMATED TRAFFIC CONTROL SIGNAL ENFORCEMENT DEVICES AT CERTAIN INTERSECTIONS.

As a medical student at Yale the issue of traffic safety has become very important to me both as a matter of public health and, personally, from the necessity to cross dangerous intersections around campus on a daily basis. Traffic accidents are a significant public safety concern as they are a leading, and preventable, cause of death among young people in this country. According to the Federal Highway Administration, red-light running is responsible for 106,000 crashes per year resulting in 1000 fatalities and 89,000 injuries[1]. I have had some exposure to traumas and have found motor vehicle accidents to be especially tragic, due to the severity of injuries that can be inflicted and, most importantly, the frustrating reality that many of these could have been prevented. We should never resign ourselves to the belief that traffic injuries and fatalities are a fact of life. Permitting red-light cameras, which have reduced traffic injuries in other states in which they have been allowed, would be an important component of accident prevention.

Red-light cameras have bee successfully installed in a variety of American cities and have reduced accidents by 25 to 45 percent[2]. A 2005 meta-analyis incorporating data from 10 controlled studies concluded that red-light cameras reduced crash-related injuries by 29 percent and side-angle crashes by 24 percent[3]. It is important to distinguish between total accidents and injuries, since low-speed rear end collisions may increase after the introduction of red-light cameras due to unanticipated braking at yellow signals, but these are less likely to result in serious injuries than the high-speed side angle crashes that red light cameras prevent. Two-years after the initiation of a red-light camera pilot program in Portland, Oregon, there was a decrease in angle and turning crashes at these intersections despite a slight increase in rear-end crashes[4]. Four years after installation, there has been a definite reduction in crashes and injuries at monitored intersections and the program has been expanded throughout the city[5]. I recently spoke to a Portland transportation safety official who credited the red-light camera program, in conjunction with a comprehensive approach to road safety, with reducing traffic fatalities to their lowest level since 1925. A 2005 study by the Federal Highway Administration involving multiple cities found that the average economic benefit of red light cameras ranged from $39,000 to $50,000 per treated site year, despite a possible increase in rear-end collisions, with greater benefits achieved at intersections with a high ratio of right-angle to rear-impact collisions, heavy traffic volumes, and shorter light cycle length[6]. In the long-term, the presence of red-light cameras impacts the overall culture of driving and has effects that spill over to unmonitored intersections.

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The introduction of red-light cameras naturally raises many concerns that should be addressed before their implementation. First, there is a perceived threat to civil liberties. However, surveillance cameras are already present in many public areas and law-abiding citizens go about their daily activities unmindful of their presence. Red-light cameras, by their very nature, are only triggered by unlawful activity, an unlawful activity that causes many injuries and deaths, and their presence is clearly indicated for deterrent effect. Even Texas, where my family resides, which has a firmly engrained culture of skepticism of government regulation, has enabled red-light camera installation due to the overwhelming public safety benefits. Second, there are concerns over proper identification of the drivers of offending vehicles. Although direct police enforcement of intersections would address this issue, police traffic enforcement invites its own safety hazards and diverts valuable police resources from other crime-prevention activities. Furthermore, red-light cameras are active 24 hours a day and are non-discriminating in their enforcement. It may be possible to obtain a photo of the vehicle driver in addition to the license plate or it may be better for infractions recorded by red-light cameras to result in civil rather than criminal penalties, without the attendant threat of point deduction and increased insurance premiums, if this approach is less controversial. Finally, it is important to remember that red-light cameras are first and foremost tools to improve road safety, not revenue-generating machines. Cameras should only be installed only at high-risk intersections and in combination with other safety improvements. A study from Philadelphia showed that lengthening the yellow signal duration by one second reduced violations by 36 percent, which was followed by a further 96 percent reduction after red-light cameras were installed[7]. Therefore, yellow signal time should be lengthened to improve intersection safety, not shortened with the intention of ensnaring drivers, as has occurred in some cities after camera installation. Also, the financial relationship between municipalities must be transparent and without any hint of impropriety. These concerns are relatively minor compared to the enormous benefits resulting from camera installation, and I urge you to consider their adoption in Connecticut.

Thank you for your consideration,
Jonathan Romanyshyn
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