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Many Motorists Enraged by Camera-Issued Tickets

By [JOE SHARKEY](#)

GUY comes out of the woods brandishing a hammer and a shotgun and screaming. A

No, that's not the start of some horror movie. It actually happened last Wednesday on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, when a man walked out of the woods yelling incoherently, stormed up to a speed camera enforcement vehicle parked on the roadside and smashed its windshield with the hammer, the police said.

The Maryland State Police described him as a white male in his 50s or 60s, "possibly with a pot belly."

The man then fled back into the woods, and the parkway was closed for several hours while investigators searched for him. The Maryland State Police said on Monday that they were still looking for him.

Let me hasten to report that I have no leads on this and that I certainly didn't suggest any illegal action in my column last Tuesday about the spread of traffic cameras, whether speed cameras on the highway or red-light cameras at intersections. I merely asked readers to share their observations. Did I get an earful or, rather, an inbox full.

I heard from about 500 people, and the responses ran about 50 to 1 against the cameras, which supporters and the industry that markets them say enhance road safety, but critics call just a gimmick to raise money.

Among those I'm hearing from are business travelers who received camera-generated tickets in the mail from places they drove through months earlier. Most business travelers pay them because they can't reasonably return to the place to fight the ticket. Some complained that they have no choice, as car rental companies routinely pay a camera ticket and subsequently charge the customer's credit card.

I've heard from long-haul truckers worried about their drivers' licenses, and from traffic engineers and police officers disputing camera industry claims about safety.

Many readers also note the documented increase in rear-end collisions at intersections where the fear of being flashed by a red-light camera can cause drivers to slam on brakes at the first sign of lights turning yellow.

Some people sent videos showing how yellow light timing seems to be shortened at some intersections to catch more drivers. Others pointed out that red-light cameras also routinely issue citations to drivers who are prudently making turns in intersections when the light suddenly changes.

And a surprising number of travelers wrote warnings about driving internationally, especially in Europe, where traffic cameras are even more widespread.

Some business travelers complained of receiving multiple citations on a short drive in a rental car near an airport.

“I received two speeding tickets, six minutes apart” on a stretch of road near the Phoenix airport where the speed limit was unclear, one reader, John Hristov, said.

And Dan Manor, another reader, wrote that he still remembered Phoenix for the surprise he received in the mail weeks after a short business trip: three speeding tickets, for a total of \$663.

Larry Lappen, a salesman, said the last moving violation he had was in 1981 — until he recently got one in the mail for a red-light violation in a small Florida town.

“I remembered the event very well, because it seemed at the time that the yellow light duration was much shorter than normal,” he wrote.

Like others, he investigated, returning to the intersection with a stopwatch to find that the yellow light was unusually short in duration. (A yellow light should last about one full second for every 10 miles an hour of speed limit in the area, one traffic engineer wrote me.) “I was there for 45 minutes and saw three cars caught in that same dilemma zone,” Mr. Lappen wrote.

Due process is, of course, a widespread concern. David Durkee said he received a camera ticket in Colorado. “They stated it was only a \$40 fine” without points on his driving record — unless he appealed, in which case points and extra costs could be added, he said. “It was made to look like forking over the cash was the only solution.”

There’s voluminous research about traffic cameras [on the Web site](#) of the National Motorists Association. The group opposes the cameras, which are typically operated by commercial vendors that get a big piece of the revenue and press municipalities for greater adoption.

“A financially viable ticket camera program can only be sustained by maintaining a travel environment that generates significant numbers of violations,” said Jim Baxter, the group’s president.

And here’s some bad news from Steven P. Scalici, a New York traffic engineer. He predicted that as technology improves, “camera detection is going to get even more stringent.” He added, “Red-light cameras have become a clear source of government income, and movements are afoot to increase that largess.”

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