

WHERE RED-LIGHT GREEN

Some towns making millions, others nothing from red-light camera deals

BY CASEY TONER

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Mounted near traffic signals in scattered locations throughout the Southland, networks of cameras keep a digital eye on busy intersections, catching images of hurried drivers who blow through red lights, all so that traffic citations can be issued.

Known as red-light cameras, the devices are installed and operated by private firms that have contracts with local governments. Under the agreements, the red-light camera companies make their money from monthly service fees and per-ticket fees, and the municipalities can reap the leftover proceeds depending on the number of red-light tickets issued.

However, an analysis of bills and receipts obtained by the SouthtownStar shows it's not always the case that money makes its way into towns' coffers.

While some local municipalities with heavy traffic have made millions of dollars, some — such as Palos Heights and Evergreen Park — haven't seen any money at all.

And Hazel Crest, Orland Park and South Holland have only received a fraction of the red-light camera revenue while red-light camera companies rake in cash through front-loaded contracts that demand thousands of dollars every month in maintenance fees before any money can be paid to the towns.

"You listen to what others were making, and it seemed like a revenue enhancer," Evergreen Park Mayor James Sexton said of the cameras. "It didn't work that way."

Wrong-way green

Evergreen Park entered into a deal with Redflex, an international firm, in 2009. In the three years during which Redflex cameras monitored three intersections, the company made about a half-million dollars from violations in the village.

Evergreen Park didn't make any money, according to village officials, because of the monthly service fees.

Redflex, which has cameras in nine Southland municipalities, required about \$17,500 in monthly fees to operate four red-light cameras there. The contract called for revenue to go to the fees first, and the remainder was to go to Evergreen Park.

But Evergreen Park never collected enough in red-light tickets to see a dime from Redflex, which itself is losing its lucrative contract in Chicago amid allegations it showered more free trips than first believed on a former city official who oversaw the contract.

Evergreen Park, in fact, had to pay more than \$15,000 for an adjudicator and security guard for hearings for the red-light camera citations that were contested, according to village officials.

When the contract with Redflex ended in 2011, Sexton opted not to renew it.

Evergreen Park Deputy Police Chief Dennis O'Dowd said that while the cameras have been "cash cows" for other towns, Redflex made no promises to the village about revenue expectations.

"They wanted to sit down and talk and kind of massage the numbers, and I said, 'If you screwed us the first time, why do I want to talk to you now?'" Sexton said. "I just said, 'Take the cameras down.'"

Palos Heights is in a similar predicament. It hasn't seen any red-light revenue since the cameras were installed in July 2009. Since then, Redflex has made \$209,730.

Redflex requires \$8,790 monthly maintenance payments for the cameras at two intersections in Palos Heights. If revenue from red-light tickets doesn't cover the full amount, the balance rolls over to the next month — which it has done every month since the cameras were installed, piling up a deficit of more than \$174,000.

According to the contract, Palos Heights taxpayers are not on the hook for the deficit, but nor will the village get any money until the balance is erased.

Palos Heights Mayor Bob Straz said money was never the point of installing the cameras. Instead, they were to deter drivers from blowing red lights.

"We are trying to create safety," Straz said. "Hopefully by the fact we haven't issued a lot of tickets, they see the red light ahead of time and they abide by it."

There were 57 total crashes at Route 83 and Harlem Avenue in 2007 and 2008. The cameras went into operation in July 2009, and there were 79 crashes there from 2010 to 2012, only a slight reduction in average from 28.5 per year to 26.3.

Likewise, there were 24 and 31 crashes in the same respective time periods at 134th and Ridgeland Avenue, for averages of 12 and 10.3.

In a prepared statement, Redflex spokeswoman Jody Ryan said the company has made communities safer for the past 25 years.

"We are proud of the public safety partnerships and results we've generated across the Chicagoland area," Ryan wrote. "Our contracts in the Chicagoland area are cost-neutral agreements. Therefore, a city never pays more than the revenue generated by the program."

A little cash from cameras

Hazel Crest is considering letting the red-light camera deal it signed with RedSpeed in 2009 expire at the year's end due to what village officials claim is a lot of work with little payoff.

Since the cameras first went up, the village has taken in \$101,000 while RedSpeed has raked in more than \$240,000.

Village manager James Whigham said the village's take has been offset by traffic court fees related to the cameras and

the cost of using police officers to review the footage for all tickets issued.

"If at the end of the day the village is not realizing any revenue enhancement on top of not realizing other benefit, it has to go," Whigham said. "It might be nice to have and maybe it's a fun toy, but maybe red-light cameras will become like hula hoops — a thing of the past."

Nor have revenue expectations become the reality in Orland Park, which installed the cameras in 2009.

Redflex has made more than \$654,000 from the Orland Park cameras in monthly service fees while the village has taken in nearly \$350,000 — about \$462,000 short of what the village budgeted in expected red-light revenue for all four years, according to budget documents.

"We don't pick red-light cameras for revenue," village manager Paul Grimes said. "We pick them for safety, and they work."

In a two-year period before the cameras were installed, there were 53 accidents at 151st Street and Harlem Avenue. In four years beginning with the installation year of 2009, there were 97.

At 151st and LaGrange Road, the numbers were 98 and 162, a reduction of about 18 percent. At 159th Street and Harlem Avenue, the numbers are 90 and 164, a reduction of about 9 percent.

Grimes said the village hired Redflex initially because of its experience and size. He said the red-light cameras provide "a smarter type of service" that frees up police officers to do other work.

More drivers obey the red lights now and stop, causing the village's red-light camera revenue to drop, Grimes said.

"No one can criticize Orland Park for doing this for revenues because our revenues aren't spectacular," Grimes said.

Revenues are even less spectacular in South Holland, which

signed a contract with Redflex in 2007. Since then, the village has taken in \$131,000 while Redflex has made \$809,000.

But village manager Jason Huisman defended the cameras, saying they have made the village's five intersections safer for drivers.

Hometown, Blue Island and Alsip also are all among the municipalities that have made less money than the red-light camera companies.

RedSpeed USA, of Lombard, received \$419,000 from its red-light camera deal in Hometown, and Hometown received \$331,000 since 2007. Since 2010, Redflex has received \$660,000 from its Blue Island deal, while the city has gotten \$628,000.

Redflex's contract with Alsip ended earlier this year. Alsip is looking for a new vendor.

Alsip Mayor Patrick Kitching said Redflex didn't respond to the town's needs. The village made about \$485,000 from its Redflex deal since December 2009, while Redflex gained about \$685,000. But the company refused to repair broken cameras and add additional cameras at 127th Street and Cicero Avenue, Kitching said.

Contracts and rewards

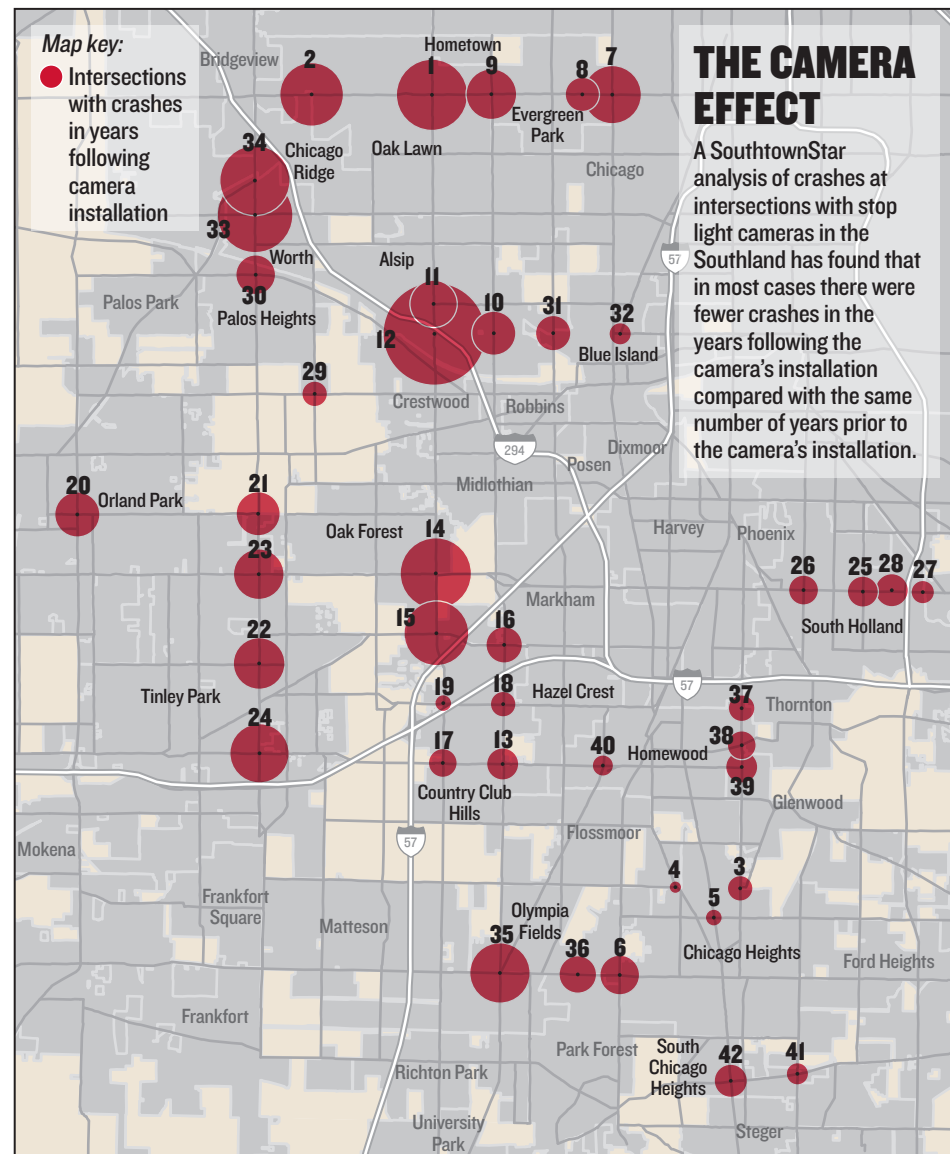
The SouthtownStar analysis of red-light camera deals shows that not all are created equally.

Redflex is the dominant player in the Southland, with many local officials saying they picked the company because of its experience.

It has deals in Oak Lawn, Evergreen Park, Alsip, Orland Park, Tinley Park, South Holland, Palos Heights, Blue Island and Olympia Fields, and the company charges the most in monthly fees — from \$4,395 a month to about \$4,600. It also bills about \$5 for every citation processed.

Meanwhile, Gatso, which has cameras in Homewood and Oak Forest, bills about \$30 per ticket issued — and with no monthly fee.

IS GOING IN SOUTHLAND



NOTE: Intersections with cameras for which the installation date is unknown are not shown

INTERSECTION WHERE RED LIGHT CAMERA IS INSTALLED	TOWN	YEAR INSTALLED	CRASHES IN YEAR(S) BEFORE INSTALLATION	CRASHES IN YEAR(S) AFTER INSTALLATION	PERCENT CHANGE IN CRASHES BEFORE/AFTER
1. 95th Street & Cicero Ave.	Oak Lawn	2007	(2004-2005) 101	(2008-2010) 89	-11.9%
2. 95th Street & Ridgeland	Oak Lawn	2008	(2005-2007) 103	(2009-2011) 71	-31.1
3. Volmer St. & Halsted Ave.	Chicago Heights	2009	(2007-2008) 16	(2010-2011) 11	-31.3
4. Volmer Street & Dixie	Chicago Heights	2010	(2009) 7	(2011) 3	-57.1
5. Joe Orr Road & Chicago Rd.	Chicago Heights	2010	(2009) 7	(2011) 5	-28.6
6. Route 30 & Western Ave.	Chicago Heights	2010	(2009) 20	(2011) 27	+35.0
7. Western Ave. & 95th St.	Evergreen Park	2008	(2005-2007) 75	(2009-2011) 58	-22.7
8. 95th St. & California Ave.	Evergreen Park	2008	(2005-2007) 12	(2009-2011) 21	+75.0
9. 95th St. & Pulaski Ave.	Evergreen Park	2008	(2005-2007) 51	(2009-2011) 45	-11.8
10. I27th Street & Crawford Ave	Alsip	2008	(2005-2007) 79	(2009-2011) 33	-58.2
11. Cicero Ave. & I23rd St.	Alsip	2008	(2005-2007) 43	(2009-2011) 39	-9.3
12. Cicero Ave. & I27th St.	Alsip	2008	(2005-2007) 255	(2009-2011) 181	-29.0
13. I83rd St. & Pulaski Ave.	Hazel Crest	2009	(2007-2008) 29	(2010-2011) 18	-37.9
14. I59th St. & Cicero Ave.	Oak Forest	2008	(2005-2007) 134	(2009-2011) 88	-34.3
15. I67th St. & Cicero Ave.	Oak Forest	2008	(2005-2007) 101	(2009-2011) 72	-28.7
16. Pulaski Road & I67th St.	Country Club Hills	2009	(2007-2008) 33	(2010-2011) 23	-30.3
17. Cicero Ave. & I83rd St.	Country Club Hills	2009	(2007-2008) 27	(2010-2011) 14	-48.1
18. Pulaski Road & I75th St.	Country Club Hills	2010	(2009) 7	(2011) 11	+57.1
19. Cicero Ave. & I75th St.	Country Club Hills	2010	(2009) 6	(2011) 5	-16.7
20. LaGrange Road & I51st St.	Orland Park	2009	(2007-2008) 63	(2010-2011) 35	-44.4
21. Harlem Ave. & I51st St.	Orland Park	2009	(2007-2008) 47	(2010-2011) 33	-29.8
22. Harlem Ave. & I71st St.	Tinley Park	2009	(2007-2008) 62	(2010-2011) 47	-24.2
23. Harlem Ave. & I59th St.	Tinley Park	2009	(2007-2008) 81	(2010-2011) 45	-44.4
24. Harlem Ave. & I83rd St.	Tinley Park	2009	(2007-2008) 97	(2010-2011) 60	-38.1
25. I62nd St. & Cottage Grove	South Holland	2009	(2007-2008) 35	(2010-2011) 17	-51.4
26. I62nd St. & State St.	South Holland	2009	(2007-2008) 21	(2010-2011) 16	-23.8
27. I62nd St. & Van Dam Rd.	South Holland	2009	(2007-2008) 32	(2010-2011) 10	-68.8
28. I62nd St. & Woodlawn	South Holland	2009	(2007-2008) 19	(2010-2011) 19	no change
29. I35th St. & Ridgeland Ave.	Palos Heights	2009	(2007-2008) 20	(2010-2011) 11	-45.0
30. Harlem Ave. & College Dr.	Palos Heights	2009	(2007-2008) 54	(2010-2011) 28	-48.1
31. I27th St. & Kedzie Ave.	Blue Island	2009	(2007-2008) 40	(2010-2011) 22	-45.0
32. I27th St. & Gregory St.	Blue Island	2010	(2009) 7	(2011) 9	+28.6
33. I11th Street & Harlem Ave.	Worth	2008	(2005-2007) 102	(2009-2011) 100	-2.0
34. Southwest Hwy. & Harlem Ave.	Worth	2008	(2005-2007) 101	(2009-2011) 85	-15.8
35. Governors Hwy. & Lincoln Hwy.	Olympia Fields	2008	(2005-2007) 142	(2009-2011) 64	-54.9
36. Lincoln Hwy. & Orchard Dr.	Olympia Fields	2009	(2007-2008) 24	(2010-2011) 24	no change
37. Halsted & I75th St.	Homewood	2009	(2007-2008) 19	(2010-2011) 12	-36.8
38. Halsted & Ridge Rd.	Homewood	2009	(2007-2008) 19	(2010-2011) 14	-26.3
39. Halsted & I83rd St.	Homewood	2009	(2007-2008) 34	(2010-2011) 18	-47.1
40. I83rd St. & Governors Hwy.	Homewood	2009	(2007-2008) 7	(2010-2011) 8	+14.3
41. Sauk Trail & State St.	S. Chicago Heights	2009	(2007-2008) 11	(2010-2011) 9	-18.2
42. Sauk Trail & Chicago Rd.	S. Chicago Heights	2009	(2007-2008) 23	(2010-2011) 19	-17.4

Sun-Times

Hometown, Worth, South Chicago Heights and Hazel Crest all use RedSpeed. The company charges almost \$1,500 per camera per month and up to about \$42 for every ticket that is paid. In addition, the company bills a \$499 monthly fee for use of its software and a computer terminal in Hometown.

Chicago Heights, Country Club Hills and Justice all use SafeSpeed. The company bills Country Club Hills and Chicago Heights up to \$40 per ticket is-

sued. Justice, which entered into a deal with the company in September 2011, pays the company \$500 in flat fees and up to \$48 for every ticket that is paid.

Former Justice Police Chief Robert Gedville, who led the selection process of SafeSpeed, was suspended with pay in September amid news reports that he emailed south suburban mayors and police chiefs touting the benefits of the company and claiming he was a SafeSpeed consultant. Gedville was fired in part due to a

separate issue in December.

He claimed that he was under an "extreme amount of pressure" to raise the revenue in the village and SafeSpeed was the only company that agreed to install cameras at village intersections. Other companies refused because of the low traffic counts in Justice.

"I sent an email to other police chiefs vouching for their program as a way of thanking them for what they had done for their village because no one else was

willing to," Gedville said, adding that SafeSpeed never paid him.

Big winners

Because of high traffic counts and regular flow of issuance of red-light tickets, some cities have raked in the cash through their red-light camera deals.

Chicago Heights has made about \$2.3 million from the SafeSpeed cameras since they were installed in 2009. Country Club Hills has made more than \$3.8 million using the same com-

pany with cameras installed in 2009, and Worth has made more than \$2.6 million since 2007 from the RedSpeed cameras.

Additionally, Oak Lawn made more than \$3.2 million in its deal with Redflex since 2007.

"These other communities may not have them on the right corners," Oak Lawn finance director Brian Hanigan said. "Right, wrong or otherwise, we have two major thoroughfares in this village and we needed to slow it down a little bit."