

April 18, 2025

MEMORANDUM

To: Transportation Committee
From: Calvin Chow, Analyst
Subject: CB 120971 - Automated Traffic Camera Code Updates

On May 6, 2025, the Transportation Committee will discuss and possibly vote on Council Bill (CB) 120971 which would update the Seattle Municipal Code (SMC) to conform with the 2024 changes to Washington State law regarding automated traffic enforcement cameras. The legislation is awaiting introduction and referral to the Transportation Committee and was previously presented as an information [item](#) at the April 15, 2025, Transportation Committee meeting. The Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) also provided a broad overview on automated traffic enforcement cameras and traffic safety at the April 1, 2025, Transportation Committee meeting.

Background¹

Over the past 20 years, Seattle has deployed automated traffic safety cameras to detect various traffic violations as authorized under State law. Deployment began with Red Light Cameras (2006) and continued with School Zone Cameras (2012), Block the Box Cameras (2020), Transit Lane Enforcement Cameras (2020), and Restricted Lane Access Cameras (2020). Seattle's phased deployment of different camera programs reflected the evolving nature of State authorization over time. Most recently, the Council passed legislation in 2023 ([Ordinance \(ORD\) 126869](#)) identifying restricted racing zones as a preliminary step for future deployment of cameras to detect speeding violations in those zones.

In 2024, the State Legislature made comprehensive changes to State laws governing traffic cameras and consolidated authority that had been established for different camera programs over the years ([ESHB 2384, 2024 Session Ch 307](#)). Two of the more significant changes included authorization for trained civilian employees to issue citations and rescinding the authority for speed cameras in designated restricted racing zones (which was the basis for ORD 126869). The State law also provides permanent authorization for Block the Box Cameras, Transit Lane Enforcement Cameras, and Restricted Lane Access Cameras which were previously authorized as pilot programs.

¹ A more detailed Central Staff [memo](#) providing background on automated traffic safety cameras (dated January 8, 2025) was attached to the April 1, 2025 Transportation Committee agenda.

Proposed Legislation

The proposed legislation amends multiple SMC sections and Ordinances. A summary of each section is provided below.

Section 1 – Automated Traffic Safety Camera Financial Policies

This section amends the City’s financial policies related to camera revenue. Prior to the 2024 State law, Block the Box Cameras, Transit Lane Enforcement Cameras, and Restricted Lane Access Cameras were authorized under a pilot program and revenues from these cameras were restricted to programs that supported equitable access and mobility for persons with disabilities. The 2024 State law provided permanent authorization for these programs and expanded the allowable uses of camera revenues.

The City’s current financial policies provide for camera revenues (after paying for camera program administration) to be spent as follows:

- 80 percent of Red-Light Camera revenue accrues to the General Fund.
- 20 percent of Red-Light Camera revenue and 100 percent of School Zone Camera revenue accrues to the School Safety Traffic and Pedestrian Improvement Fund, which funds school safety programs and improvements.
- 100 percent of Block the Box, Transit Lane Enforcement, and Restricted Lane Access Camera revenues accrue to the Transportation Fund for improvements that support equitable access and mobility for persons with disabilities.²

The proposed legislation would simplify financial policies and provide more flexibility for spending camera revenues (as provided by the 2024 State Law). Under the proposed financial policies (after paying for camera program administration):

- 80 percent of Red-Light Camera revenue would accrue to the General Fund.
- 20 percent of Red-Light Camera revenue and 100 percent of revenue from all other camera programs (School Zone, Block the Box, Transit Lane Enforcement, and Restricted Access Cameras) would accrue to a new Automated Traffic Camera Fund.

The new Automated Traffic Camera Fund would fund “safety projects and programs, including traffic, student, bicycle, and pedestrian safety projects; operational and maintenance investments; transportation improvements that support equitable access and mobility for persons with disabilities; transportation projects designed to reduce vehicle speeds; and pedestrian, bicyclist, and driver education campaigns.”

² This represents the local share of revenue raised by these camera programs. Under previous State law, Block the Box, Transit Lane Enforcement, and Restricted Access Lane Cameras were authorized under a pilot program and required that 50 percent of revenues go to the State’s Cooper Jones Active Transportation Fund and that local funds support equitable access and mobility improvements for persons with disabilities. The 2024 State Law provided permanent authority for these programs and provided an exemption from revenue sharing for local jurisdictions with existing camera programs.

Under the proposed financial policies, the same kinds of traffic safety projects, school safety programs, and disability access improvements could still be funded with camera revenues as under existing financial policies. The impact of the change is that a specific allocation of funds would no longer be prescribed in the financial policies and would instead be subject to the Council's budget deliberations.

The proposed language includes a reference to spending on "operational and maintenance investments." While this language could be interpreted broadly, SDOT's intent is to support safety and accessibility programs consistent with the rest of the proposed policy language that supports safety and accessibility projects/improvements. The legislation could be amended to clarify this language.

Section 2 – Notice of Traffic Infraction – Use of Civilian Employees

This section amends SMC to allow the use of trained and authorized civilian employees of the Seattle Police Department and the Seattle Department of Transportation to review camera infractions and issue citations. Sworn police officers may continue to perform these duties.

During past Council deliberations on expanding camera programs, the Executive had highlighted staffing limitations as a challenge for program expansion as State law requires that infractions be reviewed within 14 days.³ This change would allow for more City employees to be eligible to perform this work.

Section 3 and Section 5 – Program Changes to Conform with State Law – Warning Notices

These sections make multiple technical changes to SMC to conform with the 2024 State law, including providing permanent authorization for Restricted Lane, Block the Box, and Transit Lane Enforcement Cameras that had previously been authorized under a pilot program, and requiring an equity analysis for installing cameras at new locations.

Under the previously authorized State pilot program for Restricted Lane, Block the Box, and Transit Lane Enforcement Cameras, a warning notice for first violations was required before imposing a monetary penalty on subsequent violations. These requirements were removed under the 2024 State law. The proposed legislation would instead provide for an initial 30-day warning period for new or relocated cameras before imposing monetary penalties.⁴ The proposed 30-day warning period would be easier to administer as it is tied to the camera's activation date; the previous requirement for first violation warnings necessitated an additional administrative step to check if a vehicle had previously been issued a violation.

³ In 2023, media reported that nearly 100,000 infractions were not reviewed from 2021 to 2023, reflecting a \$4.3 million loss of ticket revenue. David Kroman (2023), "[100k expired traffic tickets take bite out of Seattle's safety budget](#)," Seattle Times.

⁴ The proposed legislation also incorporates the 2024 State law requirement that camera locations be clearly marked by placing signs at least 30 days prior to the camera's activation.

The proposed legislation excludes School Zone Cameras from the 30-day warning period, reflecting restrictions in State law.⁵ SDOT also notes that School Zone Cameras are only in operation during the school year, when children are walking to and from school and flashing school beacons are in effect. SDOT cites the limited operation of these cameras, as well as the State requirement for advanced signage of camera locations prior to activation, as additional rationale for handling School Zone Cameras separately from other camera deployments.

This proposed legislation also incorporates the equity analysis for new camera locations required under State law to analyze impacts to livability, accessibility, economics, education, and environmental health. The analysis must show a demonstrated need for the cameras based on travel of vulnerable users, evidence of vehicle speeding, rates of collision, reports of near collisions, and ineffectiveness or infeasibility of other mitigation measures.

Section 4 – Monetary Penalties

This section establishes monetary penalties for applications of camera enforcement that are authorized by the 2024 State law but are not currently implemented in Seattle. Although this legislation would establish these penalties in SMC, there is currently no Executive proposal to expand camera enforcement for these violations.

The newly established penalties would include:

- \$139 penalty for violating an approaching train signal.
- \$139 penalty for violating a railroad crossing signal.
- \$237 penalty for violating an emergency or work zone.
- \$75 penalty for violating a ferry queue.

The proposed penalties are generally consistent with existing penalties for Red Light Cameras (\$139), Speeding Traffic Cameras (\$139), School Zone Cameras (\$237), and Restricted Lane, Block the Box, and Transit Lane Enforcement Cameras (\$75).⁶ Historically, Seattle’s penalties for camera infractions have matched the ticket penalties for similar traffic infractions issued by a police officer.

⁵ [RCW 46.61.440\(3\)](#) states that the penalty for speeding in school zones “may not be waived, reduced, or suspended.”

⁶ The \$75 fine for Restricted Lane, Block the Box, and Transit Lane Enforcement Cameras was previously prescribed as part of the State pilot program authorization. While these limitations were removed in the 2024 State law, the proposed legislation does not contemplate changes to these penalties.

Section 6 – Repeal of Restricted Racing Zones – State Authorization Repealed

This section repeals SMC 11.50.580, enacted by ORD 126869, which designated restricted racing zones as a precursor to future deployment of speed enforcement cameras. The 2024 State law rescinded the authorization for cameras to be deployed in this fashion. The locations identified in SMC 11.50.580 may still be eligible for camera deployment under separate authority affirmed in the 2024 State law and addressed by SMC 11.50.570 (including camera enforcement for school speed zones, school walk areas, public park speed zones, hospital speed zones, and locations that experience higher crash risks due to vehicle speeds).

Section 7, Section 8, Section 9, Section 10 – Accounting and Administrative Procedures

These sections amend multiple ordinances to establish the proposed Automated Traffic Camera Fund in place of the existing School Safety Traffic and Pedestrian Improvement Fund and to operationalize the proposed changes to the City’s camera financial policies. These accounting changes would allow for greater fiscal transparency as all camera revenue⁷ and associated spending would be tracked within a single fund.

Considerations

The proposed legislation is necessary to implement new automated traffic safety cameras and to conform SMC with the 2024 State law. During discussion at Transportation Committee, Central Staff noted three areas of potential Council interest, discussed below. Central Staff is available if Councilmembers have additional questions or concerns. Central Staff is also available to assist in developing potential amendments for the Transportation Committee’s consideration.

Financial Policies

The proposed changes to camera financial policies are discretionary and provide more flexibility in spending camera revenues than was previously allowed prior to the 2024 State law. Under the existing financial policies, all School Zone Camera revenue and 20 percent of Red Light Camera revenue is reserved for school safety projects and programs.

Under the proposed changes, revenue from all camera programs (less the 80 percent of Red Light Camera revenue that would continue to support the General Fund) could be used for a broad range of safety projects and accessibility programs. The specific allocation of camera revenues is subject to the annual budget process and could result in similar spending outcomes as directed under current financial policies, but this would not be a requirement under the proposed policies.

The Council may wish to consider amendments to further direct camera revenue spending within the financial policies. The Council may wish to clarify the reference to “operational and maintenance programs” in the financial policies.

⁷ Except for any contribution to the General Fund established in financial policies.

Surveillance and Privacy

The proposed legislation does not change privacy protections related to automated traffic safety cameras. Under State law, cameras may only record images of the vehicle and license plate while an infraction is occurring, and the image must not reveal the face of the driver or passengers in the vehicle ([RCW 46.63.220\(8\)](#)). Furthermore, camera images can only be used to enforce traffic violations (RCW 46.63.220(11)). These privacy provisions are mirrored in [SMC 11.50.570](#) and are preserved in the proposed legislation. Seattle has been operating under these restrictions since the initial deployment of Red Light Cameras in 2006.

The expanded use of automated traffic safety cameras contemplated by this legislation are exempted from the requirements of the Surveillance Ordinance under [SMC 14.18.30.B.3](#), which provides an exemption for cameras installed pursuant to state law authorization in or on any vehicle or along a public right-of-way solely to record traffic violations.⁸

Monetary Penalties and Alternative Accommodations

During public hearing and discussion at Transportation Committee, speakers noted that Seattle's monetary penalties for camera infractions are higher than other US cities.⁹ In Seattle, the monetary penalties for camera infractions are generally consistent with the penalties for traffic violations issued by police officers (aside from the Restricted Lane, Block the Box, and Transit Lane Enforcement citations which were previously prescribed by State law at \$75).

While the proposed legislation establishes monetary penalties for additional camera infractions (as authorized by the 2024 State law), it does not change existing penalties. Changes to existing camera penalties would have revenue implications and would require further coordination with the City Budget Office to explore potential impacts to the City's budget.

The Seattle Municipal Court (Muni Court) is responsible for processing payments for all civil violations including traffic tickets, parking tickets, and camera infractions. Muni Court offers [alternative accommodations](#) to full payment for eligible residents including:

- Ticket debt reduction hearings.
- Monthly payment plan options.
- Community service in-lieu of payment.
- Unified payment for fines in multiple King County jurisdictions.
- First-violation penalty reduction (pursuant to State law).

The proposed legislation does not address or amend Muni Court procedures or programs.

cc: Ben Noble, Director

⁸ Automated traffic safety cameras may have some similarities with SDOT's License Plate Reader (LPR) cameras, which are used to assist with traffic flow monitoring and are subject to the Surveillance Ordinance. A Surveillance Impact Report for [LPR cameras](#) was issued in 2019. Note that LPR cameras are administered by SDOT in coordination with the Washington State Department of Transportation, while automated traffic safety cameras are operated by a third-party vendor under contract to the Seattle Police Department.

⁹ Comparable examples include [New York City](#) (\$50 ticket) and [Chicago](#) (\$35/\$100 ticket based on speed band).