

January 8, 2025

MEMORANDUM

To: Councilmember Saka
From: Calvin Chow, Analyst
Subject: Automated Traffic Safety Cameras

This memorandum responds to your request to document Seattle's history with automated traffic safety cameras, recent changes to Washington State law, and next steps for deployment of new automated traffic safety cameras in Seattle. This memorandum describes the Executive's proposed expansion of the School Zone Camera program in 2025, the Council's recent budget actions to pursue deployment of cameras outside of school zones, and the legislative and administrative actions that will be required for implementation.

Background

Over the past 20 years, Seattle has deployed automated traffic safety cameras to detect various traffic violations. Seattle's camera programs were enacted under various provisions in State law which have continued to evolve over time. Seattle's existing Red Light Cameras and School Zone Cameras are authorized to continue operating as established by local ordinance; however, deployment of new camera programs must conform to current State requirements. Seattle's existing laws governing automated traffic cameras are primarily contained in [Seattle Municipal Code \(SMC\) 11.50.570](#).

Beginning in 2006, Seattle began deployment of [Red Light Cameras](#) to reduce the frequency of red light running and associated collisions. The last expansion of this program occurred in 2013, and Seattle now has 31 Red Light Cameras deployed. Revenues from Red Light Cameras support the City's General Fund. The Council has adopted camera revenue financial policies to direct 20 percent of these revenues to fund traffic safety improvements in School Zones ([SMC 5.82.010.A.2](#)).

In 2012, Seattle began deployment of [School Zone Cameras](#) to enforce School Zone speed limits. The program was suspended during the pandemic and resumed operation with the 2023-2024 school year. Seattle now has 35 School Zone Cameras deployed across 19 schools. Per Seattle's camera revenue financial policies, revenues from these cameras support traffic safety improvements in School Zones ([SMC 5.82.010.A.1](#)).

In 2020, new State authorization allowed for deployment of [Block the Box Cameras](#), [Transit Lane Enforcement Cameras](#), and other Restricted Lane Access Cameras under a pilot program. Seattle has deployed Block the Box Cameras at six intersections and Transit Lane Enforcement Cameras at six locations. Seattle utilized [Restricted Lane Access Cameras for the Spokane Swing Bridge](#) during the closure of the West Seattle Bridge; however, these restrictions were removed with the reopening of the West Seattle Bridge in October 2022 and the cameras were removed. Under State law at the time of implementation, 50 percent of net revenues from these

programs may be spent locally on transportation improvements that support equitable access and mobility for persons with disabilities; and the other 50 percent of the revenues were deposited into the State's Cooper Jones active transportation safety account. These requirements are reflected in [SMC 11.570.H.7](#).

In the 2023 Adopted Budget, the Council allocated funding to double the School Zone Camera program and requested that the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) and the Seattle Police Department (SPD) provide an implementation plan for the School Zone Camera expansion and for expansion of other camera programs (SLI SDOT-304-A-001-2023). In response (SDOT memo, August 4, 2023), the Executive identified challenges to deploying new cameras before the start of the 2024-2025 school year and recommended a delay in implementation. SPD staffing constraints were identified as a primary concern as State law (at the time) required that only sworn police officers could review camera footage to issue citations (which must be issued within 14 days of the violation).

In 2023, the Council also passed legislation ([ORD 126869](#)) identifying 10 restricted racing zones as a preliminary step for future deployment of cameras to detect speeding violations in those zones. This legislation relied on provisions in State law that were authorized in 2022 but were later rescinded as part of State legislation on traffic cameras in 2024. Future legislation will be necessary to remove the restricted racing zone designations in [SMC 11.50.580](#). No cameras were deployed in Seattle under this authority.

Current State of Camera Expansion

In 2024, the State Legislature made comprehensive changes to State laws governing traffic cameras and consolidating authority that had been established for different camera programs ([ESHB 2384, 2024 Session Ch 307](#)). Key provisions of this legislation include:

- Authorization for trained civilian SPD and SDOT employees to review and issue citations ([RCW 46.63.030\(1\)\(d\)](#)).
- Rescinding authority for speed cameras under designated restricted racing zones (ESHB 2384, 2024 Session Ch 307 Sec 12)
- Maintaining authority to deploy one camera per 10,000 population to detect speed violations in locations with high crash risks ([RCW 46.63.250\(3\)](#)). Deployment of speed enforcement cameras outside of school zones would utilize this authority.
- Analysis requirements that include equity considerations and demonstrating the need for camera enforcement when deploying new cameras or relocating existing cameras ([RCW 46.63.220\(3\)](#)).
- Maintaining authority for Block the Box Cameras, Transit Lane Enforcement Cameras, and Restricted Lane Cameras (previously authorized as a pilot program). Revenues from these cameras may be spent on traffic safety activities, dedicating a proportional share of revenue for census tracts that have household incomes in the lowest quartile and those census tracts experiencing above average crash rates, and directing 25 percent of revenue to the State's Cooper Jones active transportation account after four years of camera operation (RCW 46.63.220(13)). These spending restrictions do not apply to

Seattle's existing School Zone Camera or Red Light Camera programs (RCW 46.63.220(13)(d)(ii)).

As part of his 2025 Proposed Budget, Mayor Harrell announced the expansion of the School Zone Camera program to deploy an additional 38 cameras in 19 school zones and utilize parking enforcement officers to provide additional staffing capacity ([Mayor's Budget Speech](#), September 24, 2024). During deliberation on the 2025 Adopted Budget, the Council added a proviso on \$1.18 million of SDOT's budget solely for deployment of additional traffic safety cameras outside of school zones. The proviso further specifies that the funding cannot be spent until authorized by future Council action.

Following direction from the Mayor and Council in the 2025 Adopted Budget, SDOT is working on implementing the School Zone Camera program expansion in 2025. As of the time of this writing, the Executive has not stated a position on the proviso for expansion of traffic safety cameras outside of school zones.

Anticipated Legislative Actions

The following is a brief description of anticipated legislative actions related to automated traffic safety camera deployment.

SMC Revisions to Conform with State Law

As the State has consolidated camera authority, legislation will be necessary to align current SMC with the provisions of the 2024 State Law for all camera programs authorized by the State. This would include revisions to the Traffic Code (Title 11 SMC) and to camera revenue financial policies (Chapter 5.82 SMC). Such legislation would rescind the designation of restricted racing zones (SMC 11.50.580) which are no longer authorized under State Law. SDOT is currently working on a legislative proposal, anticipating transmittal to Council in 1Q 2025.

Budget Proviso Lift

Budget legislation will be needed to lift the SDOT budget proviso on \$1.18 million for expansion of cameras outside of school zones. While SDOT is responsible for siting cameras, SPD manages the contract with the camera vendor. In addition to the cost of deploying new cameras, expansion of camera programs also impacts staffing necessary to issue citations (SPD) and to process payments (Seattle Municipal Court). The funding under proviso in SDOT is General Fund and could be transferred to other departments as needed. In consideration of an Executive proposal to lift the proviso, the Council could review locational priorities for camera deployment such as Alki Ave SW, Harbor Ave SW, and streets previously designated by the Council as Restricted Racing Zones. As of the time of this writing, the Executive has not stated a position on this proviso.

Fines and Civil Penalties

Lastly, the 2024 State law authorizes the use of an online ability-to-pay calculator to process and grant requests for reduced fines or civil penalties (RCW 46.63.220(14)). Implementing

legislation for Seattle Municipal Court may be necessary if not already covered by existing policies and procedures.

Administrative Steps for Camera Expansion

The Executive is responsible for managing traffic safety camera programs and implementing deployment of new cameras. In addition to the legislative actions described above, implementation will require the following administrative actions:

- SDOT will prepare the equity and needs analysis required for new camera locations under RCW 46.63.220(3) and the assessment of crash risk required for speed enforcement cameras deployed under RCW 46.63.250(3). These analyses would be recorded as a Clerk File to meet the State requirements.
- SDOT and SPD will coordinate with the camera contractor on design, permitting, and installation of specific camera sites. Sites may require installation of power supply by Seattle City Light.
- SDOT will install signs marking new camera locations at least 30 days prior to activation as required by RCW 46.63.220(7).
- SDOT and SPD will coordinate public engagement and outreach to announce new camera locations, including translation services.
- The Executive will post annual reports demonstrating the performance of traffic safety cameras with various metrics as required by RCW 46.63.220(6)(b)(i).

Traffic Safety Camera Programs led by non-City Agencies

In addition to the City's authority to deploy traffic safety cameras, State law allows for traffic safety cameras to be deployed on school buses (to enforce yielding to bus-armature stop signs) and on transit vehicles (to enforce transit lane restrictions). Currently, the City has no role in managing or implementing these programs.

According to media reports, Seattle Public Schools' agreement with the King County Sheriff to review infractions and process citations from school bus cameras expired in August 2022,¹ and King County Metro initiated a demonstration project (without enforcement) to test cameras mounted directly on coaches to detect bus lanes violations in December 2024.² While the City's camera program could potentially provide administrative services to other jurisdictions in the future, any such involvement would require Council approval.

cc: Ben Noble, Director
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¹ David Kroman (2023), ["School bus stop-sign violators skirt consequences in King County,"](#) Seattle Times.

² Nicholas Deshais (2024), ["AI cameras on King County Metro buses record red lane violators,"](#) Seattle Times.