

REGION OF OTTAWA CARLETON
RÉGION D'OTTAWA CARLETON

REPORT
RAPPORT

Our File/N/Réf. 03 07-98-0095
Your File/V/Réf.

DATE 22 October 1998

TO/DEST. Transportation Committee

FROM/EXP. Councillor Diane Holmes

SUBJECT/OBJET **TIMING OF TRAFFIC CONTROL SIGNALS**

REPORT RECOMMENDATION

That Transportation Committee recommend that staff select a traffic control signal in the Somerset Heights area to use as a pilot project to remove the 'four-way red light' component of the signal cycle.

BACKGROUND

The matter raised by the Somerset Heights BIA in the attached letter is with regard to the timing of traffic control signals. I am requesting that committee consider this request at its next meeting.

*Approved by
Diane Holmes*

/rn



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October 8, 1998

Diane Holmes
Chair - Transportation Committee
Regional Municipality of Ottawa Carleton
111 Lisgar Street
Ottawa, Ontario
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Re: *Light Change Schedule*

Dear Diane,

As Executive Director of Somerset Heights BIA, I have many opportunities to observe traffic patterns as I walk through the business district. The BIA encompasses Bay to Rochester Street on Somerset Street. During my walks I have noticed that many drivers ignore red lights at the peril of many pedestrians. The cause of this I believe is the timing of the lights. At one point in the change cycle all lights are red for several seconds. Drivers are aware of this and take advantage to run red lights. A solution to this problem would be to extend the amber light for a few seconds longer, but program the red - green change to happen immediately, that is to have all directional red lights eliminated. This would increase safety for pedestrians and reduce the number of drivers running red lights. Somerset Heights BIA is asking that in your capacity as Chair of the Transportation Committee, to bring this issue forward with staff and to effect a change in this policy.

Sincerely,

Gwen Toop
Executive Director
Somerset Heights BIA

Red light runners on rise

Overlapping
timing system
a failure: experts

C1 BY TOD MOHAMED

'Four reds' — a system of timing traffic lights to make intersections safer — has backfired, experts agree.

For about a decade Ottawa-Carleton has used the timing technique so that traffic lights are red in all directions for two seconds to make sure the intersection is clear before the next green light comes on.

Now many experts believe that some drivers are using the extra few seconds of overlapping red lights to squeeze through intersections — and the problem is getting worse.

"One school of thought is that traffic engineering in Ottawa-Carleton has, in an effort to reduce intersection collisions, created a bigger problem," says Jack Smith, general manager of programs at the Canada Safety Council.

"Drivers assume lights will be red both ways at all intersections — although all intersections aren't controlled that way — and consequently you get people running the light. Drivers think 'I'm safe, I can boot it'."

Red light runners appear to be an increasing problem in Ottawa-Carleton, turning intersections like King Edward Avenue and Rideau Street into symphonies of everyday madness. Platoons of squeegee kids, wide-turning trucks from Hull and lane fulls of smaller traffic attempt, and often fail, to avoid one another.

A stack of street lights are the only controls, and they are routinely disregarded. This past weekend, 12 cars and mini-vans were seen running reds at the intersection in just 40 minutes.

"It's quite a show, especially at night" says Bill Gunaratnam, who works at a Petro-Canada self-service station with a corner view of the mayhem.

Liberal MPP Mike Colle of Toronto has made intersection safety one of his pet projects. He was in Ottawa last summer to examine the problem. He calls King Edward and Rideau "one of the worst intersections in Canada." Statistically it is the most dangerous in Ottawa-Carleton, the site of 36 collisions in 1997.

There are many other cross-roads nearly as dangerous in the region. Hazeldean Road and Eagleson Road recorded 35 collisions last year. Baseline and Merivale Road was the site of 28 accidents. And the list goes on.

See **RED** on page C2

Red: Province against cameras

C2

Continued from page C1

Politicians and police agree that making regional intersections safer means cutting into the number of red light runners.

There are no plans to replace four reds in Ottawa Carleton, however.

"It seems unlikely," said Doug Brousseau, director of mobility services for the region.

"Four reds are working — four people who obey the red lights. It's supposed to be a safety measure." It's the people who abuse the four red system that are posing the problem, Mr. Brousseau said, and the region is actively looking for other ways to stop red light runners.

So called 'red light cameras' — cameras placed at intersections that can photograph offending drivers — are being touted as the way to do that. But the cameras are also drawing fire as an infringement on individual freedoms. Provincial officials have also said they are against the idea.

"We (the regional council) are on record in favour of red light cameras," says Councillor Diane Holmes. "Almost every municipality in Ontario is on record (in favour), and the police chiefs are too."

Critics say there is a price to pay if you improve public safety through increased surveillance.

"Ideally I am concerned about the notion of surveillance cameras in public places," says Eugene Oscapella, an Ottawa lawyer who advises the

privacy commissioner of Canada.

"Some people will say if it saves one life it is worth doing — and we can sympathize with that, but there is a trade-off. We sacrifice some control over (our own) behaviour."

Even at the Canada Safety Council, where red light cameras have a measure of support, there is some hesitancy.

"We are in favour of at least piloting them and evaluating them," says Jack Smith, general manager of programs.

"But it is Orwellian. How much do you want Big Brother watching you? There are some issues, no question."

Are there other alternatives?

One solution is to increase the number of police officers whose job it is to patrol intersections.

"We've directly related numerous fatalities to red light infractions," says regional police Sgt. Rick Wilhelm, who works in the traffic collision investigation unit.

"But enforcement has always been a problem. You park a cruiser there and miraculously no one runs a red."

Police will never be able to park a cruiser by every intersection, he adds.

The region has some 800 sets of traffic lights and just 22 dedicated traffic officers.

The provincial government is considering the introduction of special constables who aren't full status police officers but have the power to ticket red light runners.

It's an option Ottawa-Carleton Staff

Sgt. Philip Tennant views with skepticism.

"One of the hardest things for even police officers to do is stop a moving vehicle," he says.

As other options fall by the wayside, red light cameras are gaining more support as a way to save lives on the streets.

About two weeks ago the Ottawa-Carleton police commission voted to ask Transportation Minister Tony Clement for permission to install cameras at traffic lights.

However provincial spokesperson Dan Shultz says the chance of the request being approved is nil.

Other municipalities around Ontario have asked and been turned down because the cameras cannot identify the driver of a car that runs a red. That means the car owner receives the ticket, which runs \$180, and not necessarily the driver who committed the infraction, something the government believes is unfair.

Supporters of red light cameras have little patience with the government's hesitancy.

"That's absolute nonsense. Then we should stop giving out parking tickets too," says Ms. Holmes.

Regional council is hoping to set up trial cameras that measure the red light running problem even if they can't be used to issue tickets. But because the cameras are so expensive — about \$80,000 a piece — Ms. Holmes hopes that private firms will donate them for the time being.