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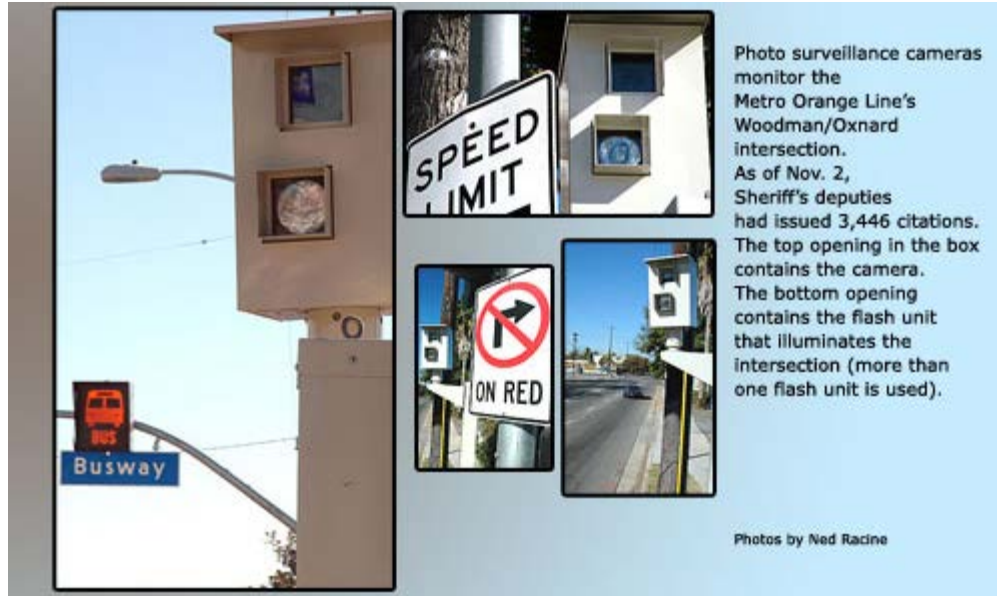
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Photo surveillance cameras monitor the Metro Orange Line's Woodman/Oxnard intersection. As of Nov. 2, Sheriff's deputies had issued 3,446 citations. The top opening in the box contains the camera. The bottom opening contains the flash unit that illuminates the intersection (more than one flash unit is used).

Photos by Ned Racine

Photo Enforcement Cameras Now Monitor Orange Line Safety

- 24 cameras now installed at 12 intersections in the Valley
- Safety program stresses education, engineering, enforcement

By NED RACINE

(Nov. 3, 2006) They wait patiently in their bland bulletproof cases, almost invisible, high above an intersection. But when a driver cruises through a red traffic signal, the Metro Orange Line photo enforcement cameras snap to attention and photograph the law breaker.

"When we first opened the Orange Line and it became apparent that a handful of motorists were not sensitive to the [Metro Liner] vehicles now crossing their path, we took a three-pronged approach: education, engineering, enforcement," explains Richard Hunt, General Manager of the San Fernando Valley Service Sector.

Metro's Transit Safety education program reached out to residents, schools and businesses along the Orange Line route. Engineering included moving traffic signs and adding "bus coming" signs. The photo enforcement cameras represent the enforcement approach.

"If you've done everything you can to make people around an active transit crossing aware, then obviously enforcement plays a role," Hunt says.

Cameras at the first three Orange Line intersections – Tujunga/Busway, Oxnard/Buffalo and Oxnard/Woodman – became operational on July 18.

3,446 traffic citations

The film cameras and their multiple flash units resulted in the Sheriff's Transit Services Bureau issuing 3,446 citations along the Orange Line, as of Nov. 3. Although a judge sets the final amount of fines, citations carry a minimum fine of \$271.

The De Soto, Mason, and Lindley intersections have just received their cameras, raising to 24 the number of cameras installed on the 14-mile line. Now, the north/south traffic flow through 12 intersections will be monitored by camera. The intersections with the highest number of near-miss reports by Metro Liner operators received the cameras.

After the cameras were installed, they were tested for several days. By law, Metro issues warning letters for 30 days to anyone captured on film committing a red-light violation. In those letters, Metro states that violators captured on film after the 30-day period will receive a citation.

Abdul Zohbi, a Systems Safety manager in Corporate Safety, has worked for Metro for 12 years. He managed the project to install photo enforcement cameras and "train coming" signs on the Metro Blue Line.

Zohbi considers the Orange Line's photo enforcement camera network a safety tool as well as an enforcement tool.

"Once burned, twice shy," he says. "Because if you get a ticket, you're not going to do it again. It's a deterrent. Our optimum goal is not to issue a lot of citations. Metro isn't in it to make money, but to enhance safety."

Near-miss reports decreased

The number of near-miss reports has decreased at some Orange Line intersections, an early sign that the cameras deter red-light violators. "This is exactly what we want to see," Zohbi says.

The cameras are triggered by electrical loops embedded in the intersection pavement. When the traffic control system displays a red light, the loops are activated and waiting for a heavy object to cross over them. If a vehicle crosses the loops, the camera photographs the vehicle, its license plate and its driver's face. The 120-shot-capacity cameras capture violators on 35-mm film cartridges that are changed each day.

A camera contractor retained by Metro reviews the photograph to verify that a violation has occurred. The contractor also checks that the vehicle's license and driver's face are both visible. If they are not, a citation cannot be issued.

The contractor prints the citation and sends it to the Transit Services Bureau. The TSB examines the citation, signs it and sends it to the violator. Because the photographs are taken on film, they are not easily modified, a feature the courts prefer.

In case of a collision at an Orange Line intersection, the cameras could produce an additional benefit: fixing responsibility for the accident.

Similar cameras are planned for the Metro Gold Line Eastside Extension and the Exposition Light Rail project.