

# Photo enforcement a solution looking for a problem

By Gary Hodges

From time to time where I work we have technology fairs where vendors buy pizza to entice us in, and then marvel us with their shiny new computers. Undoubtedly many attendees return to their supervisors and suggest how a new computer will make them more productive.

With this experience in mind, I was not surprised to learn the idea of photo enforcement was planted by a steady stream of vendors knocking on the door of the Longmont Police Department.

I get it. I really do. I understand the desire of the police for this technology. Just as I might believe in the allure of increased productivity with the acquisition of a new computer, the police believe they will be more effective with photo enforcement in their bag of tools.

The question to answer, however, is not one of desire but one of need. My boss might accurately point out my current computer is only a few years old, and by any measure still an effective piece of equipment. This is the same line of reasoning we should follow when determining the need for photo enforcement.

How dangerous are the streets of Longmont? Are scofflaws really creating an environment of imminent danger for us all? I travel extensively and thus have the opportunity to drive in many different cities, and I am confident that Longmont enjoys a relaxed and safe driving atmosphere when compared to many other areas. I was curious though. Are my experiences biased due to my belief that Longmont is a great city to live in?

The 1999-2008 average national per capita fatality rate was 14.43 ([www.nhtsa.gov](http://www.nhtsa.gov)). This means that for the 10-year average, about 14½ people for every 100,000 died in auto accidents. How does this compare to Colorado? It turns out our state is appreciably safer than the national average, with a per capita fatality rate of about 11 (Only 2007 and 2008 data were readily available at [www.nhtsa.gov](http://www.nhtsa.gov)). During my Internet research I discovered something remarkable. Among the 200 largest cities in America, one of our neighbor cities is in the safest top 10 ([www.allstatenews.com](http://www.allstatenews.com)). Congratulations Fort Collins! I am impressed, but how does Longmont stack up? Not only does Longmont compare favorably

with Fort Collins, but over a 10-year period Longmont is essentially equally safe ([www.city-data.com](http://www.city-data.com)). Both 10-year average per capita fatality rates are about four. Let's pause for a moment and pat ourselves on the back for being such good drivers.

A natural argument one might put forward is, "Even if we are among the safest cities in America, we should do more to be even safer." At this point I would offer the question is about balance, risk acceptance and impacts, both real and perceived, on our quality of life in this great city.

It is possible and within our means to bring the long-term fatality rate to near zero with aggressive traffic control measures. Speed limits on every street could be reduced to 10 mph. We could put speed bumps every 100 feet. We could increase taxes to expand our police force substantially, and instruct them to rigorously enforce every infraction no matter how slight. We could even contract with a vendor to place photo enforcement technology around the city to catch those few infractions missed by the expanded police force.

Who would want to live in a such a place?

I would argue that as Longmont currently exists, we have a good relationship among the residents, police and local government. When I drive in my car I do not hold the belief I am a target of police enforcement. I keep up with local government news, and I am not left with the impression that the mayor and City Council perceive Longmont as a population in need of control. The addition of photo enforcement would tip those scales. We would move to an adversarial relationship between the residents and police. There would be a significant loss of good will between the population and local government.

I suggest the mayor, City Council and all residents of Longmont consider the broader impacts of implementing photo enforcement in what is already one of the safest cities in America. I am confident that such consideration will lead to the conclusion that photo enforcement is not appropriate for our city.

It is a solution seeking a problem and, in Longmont's case, the problem does not rise to the level of the solution proposed.

Gary Hodges has served on Longmont's Transportation Advisory Board since 2007 and has lived in the city since 1997.

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