



September 25, 2025

An Opinion on the Cancellation of Automated Speed Enforcement

After 5 years, automated speed enforcement is on the political ropes. Lots of thinking has been done about what's gone wrong with the once broadly accepted program. Is it vandals chopping them down? Most people see that as lawlessness. What changed? A hint, Toronto increased 75 cameras to 150 in 2025. The tipping point has arrived.

Studies show this, but drivers already know that near speed cameras people slow down. There is a memory effect that lasts after the camera is gone too.

It's a problem when careful drivers, - good citizens, are getting nabbed for petty fines, in places and times where it feels like an irrelevant gotcha! It doesn't make sense, because the value proposition for better safety is not apparent.

The cameras work by taking pictures of speeding cars, and the speed is recorded and sent with the image to a processing centre. It is there, where an accredited officer makes it into a ticket, and mails it out to the car owner.

Cameras have software that controls when they are turned on (always in Toronto), and the speed threshold to snap the picture. The secret formula on this threshold is closely guarded, and consistent among municipalities in Ontario because it was developed in conjunction with Police. If the secret gets out – everyone will use the higher number as their new speed limit and reduce the effectiveness. This threshold needs a bump-up to eliminate the most petty of tickets, -the ones that are annoying good drivers.

Computers onboard cameras can be easily programmed to shut the camera down overnight, raise the speed threshold, and randomly sleep or wake. It is this last point that's a game changer. While the camera stands stoically as a good soldier, drivers slow simply because it is there. Like the "ghost cars" used by police, even chancing a ticket is all it takes to change. Those that speed past might get a nasty ticket. Or maybe not this time. There would be less tickets to get the same effect, and less public backlash.

There is no sense in camouflaging a road side threat. Toronto's speed cameras are grey boxes because the City said so. They should be bright and apparent, painted like giant black and yellow hornets, because that is what they are! A hint from mother nature perhaps, striped things, especially black and yellow, signify caution and danger. We are programmed to notice.

The original idea was to slow down in school zones. Then it was community safety zones, and Council included other places over time. The program became a tin cop, and lost respect. There is no school by the Parkside Drive camera. It's just a speeding hotspot with tragic history. Bringing this program back to schools could restore lost respect and acceptance. Why not just operate cameras during school hours if it's really about the safety of children? Another easy fix.

The cash grab argument is important. Cameras are supposed to be a safety tool, not a road tax that's part of the war on the car. Careful drivers shouldn't feel the sting of a petty ticket, meaningless to fixing a behavior problem that doesn't exist in the first place. City Council should scale back the program immediately, and do some cost accounting to right size it. We don't need all 150 cameras to remain cost neutral, and the public knows this. Camera locations can be cut back while balancing the burgeoning costs of administering the program, and handling the growing backlog of ticket appeals by irate citizens.

Why bother to fix this before the Premier pulls the plug on their own legislation? Because the City can and should make it right immediately. Dial back the tickets by programming the cameras to shut off randomly, off outside school hours, reduce locations, widen the threshold, and keep them only at schools. And yes, show them off with signs, stickers and paint for maximum effect.

I'd like to see one more try before it is cancelled. At least in recognition that we got it wrong and are willing to do better. Not convinced? One can only imagine the maze of speed humps, chicanes, traffic circles, stop signs and bike lanes the Council will deploy instead. Would that be better?

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stephen Holyday', with a stylized, flowing script.

Stephen Holyday
Councillor - Ward 2
Etobicoke Centre