

Ramp Meters: They Just May Alter Your Life

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As a regular I-40 commuter, I feel like traffic jams are the story of my life. And it is obvious I'm not alone. But there may be hope. Legislation enacted last week provides the state Department of Transportation with an additional tool to combat traffic congestion: the ramp meter, a traffic control device never before seen in these parts. See [S.L. 2014-58](#) (H 1025).

Ramp control meters are basically stop lights (minus the yellow caution light) placed on highway entrance ramps. Drivers must stop when the light is red. When the device is green, a single vehicle may proceed through the meter, which, according to [this feasibility study](#) by the Atkins consulting firm for NCDOT, is designed to "meter the flow of entering vehicles proportionate to the available gaps in traffic." Other states, including the State of Washington, use such devices. Indeed, [Washington's DOT claims](#) that ramp meters save travel time and reduce accidents by 30 percent. We all know what happens without them, but here's how Washington's DOT puts it:

Without ramp meters, multiple cars try to merge simultaneously. Drivers on the freeway slow down to allow the cars enter and these slower speeds quickly cause backups. If cars enter the highway in controlled intervals, they are less likely to cause a disruption to the traffic on the freeway. A short wait on the ramp allows drivers to increase their average freeway speed and shorten overall freeway travel times.

The News & Observer's Road Warrior, Bruce Siceloff, [wrote about the devices](#) last year, explaining that "they're controversial even where studies credit them with reducing delays."

Indeed, the Atkins report noted that public opposition to ramp metering typically stems from the mistaken view that the meters increase rather than reduce delays. In addition, the report noted that there is a perception that rear-end collisions may increase because cars are stopped on the ramp. Finally, Atkins wrote that "[l]ocal agencies tend to perceive the ramp meters will back up traffic and degrade traffic flow on their crossing arterial roadway." Thus, the report recommended that education be a central component of any ramp meter deployment.

Failure to stop at a ramp meter displaying a red light is designated in new G.S. 20-158(c)(6), effective for offenses committed on or after December 1, 2014, as an infraction. Unlike running through a stop sign or red light, failing to stop for a ramp meter does not result in driver's license or insurance points.

The Atkins report recommended several intersections along I-40 and other highways in the Triangle as suitable for ramp metering. The estimates cost of installing the meters on 14 ramps is \$3.2 million.

Now that the General Assembly has sanctioned these devices, Triangle commuters may soon be affected. If the results are positive, they may change many lives for the better.