

## Bill in Maine Legislature would allow police to put on their red lights

Law officers say studies show flashing red is more visible in the daylight.

BY **SCOTT THISTLESTAFF** WRITER

Mainers long made nervous by flashing blue lights in their rear-view mirrors could have another color to worry about if a bill before the Legislature passes into law.

A measure before the Legislature's Transportation Committee would allow police to use up to 50 percent red lights instead of the traditional blue lights that have been giving motorists cold sweats for decades.

The change, police say, is based on several studies that show the human eye can see flashing red lights better in the day and flashing blue better at night.

Rep. Matthew Harrington, R-Sanford, told members of the committee Tuesday that the move would improve safety for officers and motorists. Harrington, who is also a police officer, said several other states including New York, New Jersey and Connecticut use predominantly red lights on their police vehicles.

"Officer safety was my primary reason for putting this legislation forward," Harrington told the committee. "No detail can be considered too small to address, if it can make an officer safer while he or she performs their duties."

Gorham Police Chief Daniel Jones favors the change and so does the Maine Chiefs of Police Association. Jones shared some of the details of a study on the topic done by the Florida Highway Patrol. He said numerous other studies could be "found all over the place."

Jones said blue lights remain the color of choice at night as they require only one-third the intensity to match the perceived brightness of a red light. "Basically, red is brighter during the day and blue is brighter at night," Jones said. He said red also is a better color at night in fog and haze or other weather conditions that can reduce visibility. He said flashing light colors also have an effect on the perceived direction of travel, and at night red lights are more likely to appear to be moving away from an observer while blue lights are more likely to be perceived as moving toward the observer.

So giving police the option of having both colors is important. He said some police cars in other states also are equipped with light sensors that automatically pick which color will be best for the environment the police car is in when the officer flicks on his or her lights.

“All science aside, I’m sure anyone who has driven at all on the highways has come up on an emergency vehicle stopped on the side of the road and you are surprised how close you are before you recognize there are emergency lights on,” Jones said. “You can be right on top of them before you can see the lights. This isn’t just for law enforcement officers or firefighters or EMTs, this is safer for the public at large. Obviously, when we are in danger they are in danger as well.”

Rep. Gay Grant, D-Gardiner, a member of the committee, said she was taught to drive by her father, who was a police officer at the time. “I was trained, anytime you see a light behind you, you pull over,” Grant said.

Still, she said a public education campaign would likely be necessary to warn and inform motorists that police could be using red lights as well as blue.

Jones said information campaigns are always good whenever law enforcement agencies change procedures. “People are able to figure out if they see a police car behind them with red and/or blue lights flashing, they can usually figure out it’s a police car and if they see a fire truck with red and/or blue lights they can usually figure out it’s a fire truck,” Jones said. “Education is great, but I don’t think it’s that complicated of a thing, even though historically we’ve been blue.”

Rep. Wayne Parry, R-Arundel, said he found that the flashing blue lights of police cars can be nearly blinding at times. “I know if an officer has a car pulled over and I’m approaching, if there is anything on the sides, it really bothers,” Parry said.

Jones said the lights police now use are as much as 100 times brighter than they were 20 years ago. Parry said he didn’t experience the same kind of blinding effect with the flashing red lights of fire trucks. Jones said the cruisers in his department could select whether their lights are at their maximum brightness or a lower power, and officers determine which setting they use based on their situation. The bill does not appear to address the brightness or the blinding concerns raised by Parry.

Harrington said several years ago the Legislature changed the law requiring that fire trucks use only flashing red lights and allowed them to have some blue lights as well.

And while many police departments nationwide use both red and blue lights, some have gone the opposite direction of Harrington's bill and are switching to just blue lights.

In 2016, police in Hamilton, Ohio, switched from red and blue lights to just blue lights; the move followed a similar change made by the Ohio State Patrol in 2012, according to the Journal-News newspaper.

Harrington's bill doesn't mandate Maine police departments begin using red lights but would rather allow it, as current law allows for only flashing blue lights on police vehicles.

Harrington said there were some police departments already using red lights – technically in violation of state law.

If the bill is approved, Jones said it was likely that police departments would gradually move to mixed lights as they updated their fleets of police vehicles. Even so, he said, many departments simply swap out police vehicle light bars when they get new vehicles as a cost-saving measure.

The bill, L.D. 172, will be scheduled for a work session in the weeks ahead before committee takes a vote to recommend the change to the full Legislature.

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