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Minn. Stat. § 480A.08, subd. 3 (2012).*

**STATE OF MINNESOTA  
IN COURT OF APPEALS  
A13-1787**

State of Minnesota,  
Appellant,

vs.

Vernon Lee Williams,  
Respondent.

**Filed March 24, 2014  
Reversed and remanded  
Halbrooks, Judge**

Hennepin County District Court  
File No. 27-CR-13-13043

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Defender, Minneapolis, Minnesota (for respondent)

Considered and decided by Halbrooks, Presiding Judge; Stoneburner, Judge; and  
Schellhas, Judge.

## UNPUBLISHED OPINION

**HALBROOKS**, Judge

In this pretrial appeal, appellant State of Minnesota argues that the district court erred by granting respondent's motion to suppress evidence obtained during a traffic stop. Because we conclude that the stop was justified by reasonable, articulable suspicion of an equipment violation, we reverse and remand.

### FACTS



The relevant facts are undisputed. On the morning of April 23, 2013, Officer Peter Hafstad of the Minneapolis Police Department was on patrol, performing routine license-plate checks. He observed a vehicle turning in a different direction than its signal indicated and believed the driver may have been trying to avoid him. Officer Hafstad lost sight of the vehicle, and when he saw it again, he observed that its center brake light was illuminated at only one-third of its capacity. He activated his emergency lights and siren and followed the vehicle for several blocks.

When the vehicle stopped, Officer Hafstad identified the driver as respondent Vernon Lee Williams. Officer Hafstad discovered that Williams's driver's license was cancelled as inimical to public safety (IPS). Williams was arrested and later charged with driving after cancellation IPS in violation of Minn. Stat. § 171.24, subd. 5 (2012).

Williams moved to suppress the state's evidence and stipulated to the facts in the police report. The state argued that the traffic stop was justified by a violation of Minn. Stat. § 169.57, subd. 3(a) (2012)—a law requiring that all vehicle brake lights be “maintained in good working condition.” Williams argued that his center brake light was

adequately maintained in that it was operational and that the stop was not premised on reasonable, articulable suspicion that he had violated the law.

The district court agreed with Williams, concluding that his center brake light was in “sufficiently good working condition.” The district court granted Williams’s motion to suppress. The state appeals.

## D E C I S I O N

“When reviewing a district court’s pretrial suppression ruling on undisputed facts, we consider the facts independently and decide de novo whether the undisputed facts warrant suppression as a matter of law.” *State v. Wiggins*, 788 N.W.2d 509, 512 (Minn. App. 2010) (citing *State v. Othoudt*, 482 N.W.2d 218, 221 (Minn. 1992)).

Law enforcement officers are permitted to “conduct a brief, investigatory stop when the officer has a reasonable, articulable suspicion that criminal activity is afoot.” *State v. Timberlake*, 744 N.W.2d 390, 393 (Minn. 2008) (quotation omitted). Generally, when an officer observes a traffic violation, no matter how insignificant, the officer has an objective basis for stopping the vehicle. *State v. George*, 557 N.W.2d 575, 578 (Minn. 1997). But an officer’s mistaken interpretation of a statute may not form the basis for a traffic stop. *State v. Anderson*, 683 N.W.2d 818, 824 (Minn. 2004).

Minnesota law requires that vehicles be equipped with two rear brake lights that are “plainly visible and understandable” from 100 feet away. Minn. Stat. § 169.57, subd. 1 (2012). The law further requires that all brake lights be “maintained in good working condition.” *Id.*, subd. 3(a).

There is no dispute that Williams's center brake light was operating at only one-third of its capacity. The issue on appeal is whether the officer had a reasonable, articulable basis to stop Williams for violation of the statutory requirement that all brake lights be "maintained in good working condition." Williams argues that his center brake light did not violate the statute because, although only partially illuminated, it was in "good working condition" because Officer Hafstad could observe that it lit up when the brakes were applied. He contends that it functioned adequately and therefore did not violate the statute. Consequently, there was no objective, legal basis for the stop.

We do not agree that the statute merely commands that brake lights be perceptible. The plain meaning of "good working condition" does not mean a brake light functioning at one-third of its capacity. Nor does "good" working condition mean "adequate" or "sufficient" working condition.

Because Williams's brake light was not in "good working condition" in a plain and objective sense, the traffic stop was justified. The district court therefore erred by suppressing the evidence discovered as a result of the traffic stop.

**Reversed and remanded.**