
Transportation Committee

HB 1909

Brief Description: Authorizing the use of automated license plate recognition systems.

Sponsors: Representatives Appleton, Taylor, Ryu, Harmsworth, Condotta, Buys, Goodman, Shea and Morris.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Regulates the use automated license plate recognition systems (ALPRS or system) by various governmental entities, including law enforcement and parking enforcement agencies.
- Forbids the use of ALPRS for any other purpose beyond what is allowed under the act, makes ALPRS data inadmissible in court if obtained in violation of the act, creates a cause of action for violations of the act, and requires annual reporting by agencies using ALPRS.

Hearing Date: 2/20/17

Staff: David Munnecke (786-7315).

Background:

Traffic Safety Cameras.

Pursuant to state statutes, local governments may use automated traffic safety cameras to detect stoplight, railroad crossing, or school speed zone violations. The use of such cameras is restricted to two-arterial intersections, railroad crossings, and school speed zones. Prior to use of such cameras, the local legislative authority must adopt an ordinance allowing their use. All locations where an automated traffic safety camera is used must be clearly marked by placing signs in locations that clearly indicate to a driver that he or she is entering a zone where traffic laws are enforced by an automated traffic safety camera. Automated traffic safety cameras may only take pictures of the vehicle and vehicle license plate while an infraction is occurring, and must not reveal the face of the driver or passengers.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Photo Toll Systems.

Photo toll systems are camera-based imaging systems that use digital video or still image formats to record license plate images of vehicles using toll lanes for the purpose of collecting a photo toll. The Washington State Department of Transportation has the authority to issue a civil penalty to the registered owner of the vehicle when a toll is assessed through the use of a photo toll system and the toll is not paid by the toll payment due date. Similar to automated traffic safety cameras, photo toll systems may only take pictures of the vehicle and vehicle license plate and all locations where a photo toll system is used must be clearly marked by placing signs in locations that clearly indicate to a driver that he or she is entering a zone where tolls are assessed.

Use of Camera Images.

Images, photographs, and other electronic images obtained via a traffic safety camera or a photo toll system are for the exclusive use of law enforcement in the enforcement of infractions generated by a traffic safety camera or the tolling agency for toll collection and enforcement. Such images are not open to the public and may not be used in court in a pending action or proceeding unless the action or proceeding relates specifically to the traffic violation or toll collection penalties in question.

Automated License Plate Recognition Systems.

Automated license plate recognition systems (ALPRS) generally consist of one or more cameras to capture images of a license plate; a processor and application capable of performing optical character recognition (OCR) to extract the alphanumeric characters from an image; application software to compare the license plate characters to a database; and a user interface to display the images, the OCR data, and an alert, if the license plate characters are a match to particular databases.

The Washington State Patrol currently uses ALPRS in several of its divisions and programs, including:

- commercial vehicles;
- motor carrier safety;
- homeland security;
- criminal investigations; and
- vehicle license fraud.

Summary of Bill:

Governmental Usage of Automated License Plate Recognition Systems.

An ALPRS may be used as a component of an authorized photo toll system or an authorized automated traffic safety camera.

A law enforcement or parking enforcement agency may use an ALPRS to locate vehicles on a watch list. A watch list must be updated with current information at least every 24 hours, and if there is no match to a license plate on the watch list, the data generated by the system may not be:

- used to identify the owner or driver of a vehicle;
- shared with any other agency, entity, or person;
- used for any other purpose; or

- retained for more than 12 hours.

A watch list used by a parking enforcement agency may contain only license plates of vehicles subject to impoundment or immobilization pursuant to local ordinance. A watch list used by a law enforcement agency may contain only license plates of:

- stolen vehicles or stolen license plates;
- vehicles listed as part of an "Amber Alert;"
- vehicles associated with individuals for whom there are outstanding felony warrants; and
- vehicles associated with individuals for whom there is probable cause to believe they have committed a felony, but exigent circumstances prevent the immediate procurement of a warrant. The license plate of such a vehicle may not be included in a watch list for more than 48 hours.

A parking enforcement agency may use an ALPRS to enforce time restrictions on the use of parking spaces. Any data generated by such a system may only be used to detect whether a vehicle has violated a time restriction on parking. Unless such a violation is detected, the data may not be used, shared, or retained in the manner described above.

A transportation agency may use an ALPRS to provide real time traffic information to the public. Any data generated by such a system may only be used to compute travel times or speeds of vehicles, and may not be:

- used to identify the owner or driver of a vehicle;
- shared with any other agency, entity, or person; or
- retained for more than four hours.

Any agency may use an ALPRS to control access to secured areas. Any data generated by such a system may only be used for comparison against a list of vehicles authorized to enter the area. If access to the area is not granted, the data may not be used, shared, or retained in the manner described above.

An agency may use an ALPRS only as allowed under the act, and an agency may not obtain or use information collected by a system operated by a third-party entity unless that entity follows the requirements of the act.

Legal Proceedings.

Information that is obtained in violation of the restrictions in the act is declared to be inadmissible in any civil or criminal case in any state court. There is an exception from this restriction in the case of an action for damages brought by a person claiming that their rights were violated by the use of an ALPRS that was used in violation of the restrictions in the act, but only when the permission of that person is granted.

A person who violates any of the restrictions in the act is subject to legal action for damages, which may be brought by any person claiming that a violation of the restrictions in the act has injured their business, person, or reputation. An injured person is entitled to actual damages, including mental pain and suffering, or liquidated damages of \$1,000. An injured person may also be awarded reasonable attorneys' fees and costs.

Reporting.

An agency that uses an ALPRS to locate vehicles on a watch list must annually report on its usage on the agency's public website. This report must include the:

- number of license plates scanned;
- source of and categories of information included on watch lists used by the agency;
- number of confirmed matches and the number of tentative matches that upon further investigation did not correlate to an actual match;
- number of matches that resulted in arrest and prosecution;
- number of stolen vehicles and stolen license plates recovered due to use of the ALPRS; and
- number of vehicles impounded or immobilized due to use of the ALPRS.

Definitions.

"Agency" means the State of Washington, its state and local agencies and political subdivisions, and their respective employees and agents. "Automated license plate recognition system" or "system" means any system consisting of one or more cameras combined with optical character recognition or other computer algorithms to convert images of license plates into computer-readable or human-readable characters. "Parking enforcement agency" means a public agency that enforces parking regulations. "Secured area" means an area, enclosed by clear boundaries, to which access is not open to the public and to which entry is only obtainable through specific access control points. "Watch list" means a list of license plate numbers to be compared against a license plate number obtained from an automated license plate recognition system, but does not include a list not used for comparison to license plate numbers obtained from an automated license plate recognition system.

The entirety of the act is created as a new chapter in Title 46 RCW.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Preliminary fiscal note available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.