



COLLECTIONS CORNER

THE USE OF AUTOMATIC LICENSE PLATE RECOGNITION CAMERAS IN MUNICIPAL COURT WARRANT SERVICE

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Security cameras. Red-light cameras. Toll-road cameras. Look out people – there’s a new camera in town.

Mobile automatic license plate recognition cameras (commonly referred to as “ALPR”) are being used by law enforcement around the world. Developed in the United Kingdom in 1992 to combat terrorism and introduced by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 2006,¹ ALPR cameras can now be found in over 29 states in the United States,² including many Texas cities.

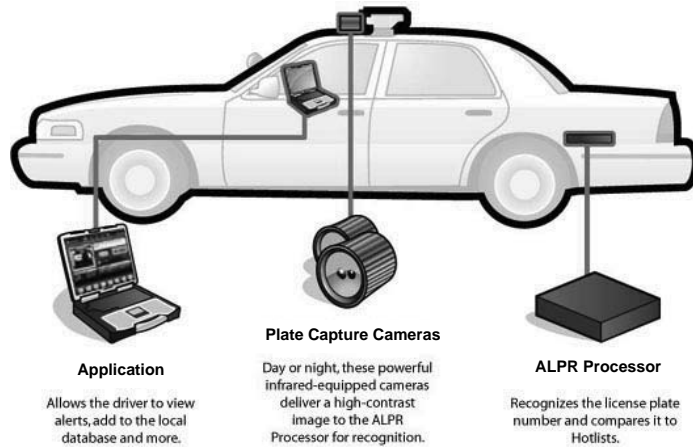
What exactly is ALPR, and what can it do? The ALPR system consists of high-tech infrared cameras coupled with advanced software that reads license plates. The cameras are mounted on a vehicle, the software is often installed in the vehicle’s trunk, and both are connected to a mobile terminal in the car – usually the officer’s existing computer terminal. Most efficient is the four-camera system allowing one camera to be mounted facing the front, back, and each side of the car. The cameras snap photos of license plates as they pass, at speeds of up to 120 miles per hour,³ in whatever weather conditions at any time of day. How many license plates can be read depends on the number of cameras used and the system manufacturer. Estimates range from up to 3,000 plates per hour⁴ to up to 3,000 plates per minute.⁵ Either way, it is a lot

more than an officer could manually check. And it’s safer—the officer can keep hand on the wheel and eyes on the road.

The software then processes the images to isolate the plate number, using optical-character-recognition technology originally developed for high-speed mail sorting.⁶ The computer runs the plate numbers against any database that has been uploaded into the system and simultaneously records the vehicle’s

Mesquite Police Department was the first to use another manufacturer’s system, and the Austin City Council recently approved a grant for the police department to purchase three readers for patrol cars. ALPR readers are used for locating suspects, stolen vehicles, and missing persons. But “the possibility is whatever you want to do,” said Cam McCabe, Court Administrator for Tyler Municipal Court.

The Tyler Municipal Court is the



identification, photos, GPS location, and the timestamp for every vehicle.⁷ If there is a hit, the system audibly alerts the officer – pings or beeps or chirps - so the officer can visually confirm the plate number.

The Houston Police Department, according to one system manufacturer, has one of the largest single-agency deployments in the United States and was the first agency in Texas to use its system in 2006.

first court in Texas to use ALPR readers solely for warrant service. In August, 2008, the Tyler Municipal Court purchased a four-camera system to equip each of its five city marshal vehicles at a total cost of \$125,000. They were paid for out of the Court Technology Fund. The software was connected to the city network allowing the database of vehicles of interest to be updated every few minutes. “Literally, you have a warrant, get it signed, and

an hour later, you can be arrested,” said McCabe. The marshals also use the ALPR readers to enforce parking ordinances and place boots on vehicles with outstanding parking tickets. Although the Tyler Police Department does not have its own cameras, the court gives the department access. In fact, according to McCabe, within 48 hours of getting the ALPR readers, police were able to locate a missing person when a camera captured the victim’s vehicle and recorded the location with timestamp.

Of course, we all know technology isn’t perfect. There are inconsistencies in license plate designs, novelty frames may block portions of the plate needed for the software to recognize a number, and people have certainly tried spray blockers to keep red-light cameras from reading their plate numbers – despite the fact that Section 502.409 of the Transportation Code makes it a Class C misdemeanor to use or attach anything to a license plate that obscures, impairs, or distorts the readability of the number. (And it

is a Class B if the owner knowingly altered or made illegible the letters, numbers, or other identification marks.) However, McCabe said the Tyler city marshals have not had any problems with people obscuring their plates to avoid the ALPR cameras or with the technology itself. She said there has been one complaint based on invasion of privacy, but for the most part, there has been a very positive citizen reaction. “When [someone] gets arrested and realizes it was the camera [that caught them], they’re just so fascinated,” said McCabe.

Based on hits from the cameras, as of February 28, 2009, the Tyler Municipal Court has cleared 908 warrants for 345 people valuing over \$273,000. The court has collected over \$94,000 in cash – which means the ALPR systems can potentially pay for themselves within six months.

Port Arthur Police Department has also had success with ALPR in Class C warrant service. For two weekdays this past January, Officer Chuck Cobb had a demonstration unit on his

patrol car. In those 16 hours, Officer Cobb cleared \$76,000 of outstanding Class C warrants (along with 124 traffic stops and 72 arrests). But Officer Cobb said it was the residual effect the ALPR system had that was most impressive. “Word got out that we had a tool, [and] in the next four days, the municipal court was swamped with people coming in to pay warrants.”

On the heels of the 2009 Great Texas Warrant Round-up, ALPR may be one way for your courts to increase warrant service and collections year-round. ↗

¹Norm Gaumont & Dave Babineau, *The Role of Automatic License Plate Recognition Technology in Policing: Results from the Lower Mainland of British Columbia*, The Police Chief 50 (November 2008)

²J. Douglas Walker, *Information Technology Advances Push the Privacy Boundaries Again*, 41 (Nat. Ctr. For St. Courts 2008)

³*Id.*

⁴Gaumont & Babineau

⁵Walker

⁶J. Vlahos, *Surveillance Society: New High-Tech Cameras Are Watching You*, *Popular Mechanics* (January 2008)

⁷Walker



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