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Chief touts success of in-car camera

By Schuyler Kropf

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North Charleston Police Chief Jon Zumalt said the new camera technology that allows a patrol car computer to instantaneously read and record license plates is a success, with 10 stolen cars and 14 stolen plates recovered since May.

North Charleston officer Pfc. Victor Buskirk gives a demonstration of the PlateScan, a new system that allows police to photograph license plates and check them against national criminal databases. He'd also like to expand the technology into high-crime areas with a fixed camera that could scan dozens of cars an instant.

The technology, known as an Automated License Plate Recognition System, works on a character recognition program through cameras on a patrol car. The cameras can spot plates from various angles, whether a vehicle is moving or parked.

Plates that are flagged "wanted" or "stolen" by authorities can be detected in an instant as they're run through a laptop computer. An alarm goes off telling the patrolman when suspect vehicles are detected.

The cameras work in daylight or at night, and potentially can read hundreds of plates an hour, readings that previously might have required a radio call to check.

Since they were put into effect in May, Zumalt said the result has been 10 cars returned to their owners, totaling tens of thousands of dollars in recoveries.

North Charleston was the first police agency in the state to use the technology, at a cost of about \$24,000. At least three other agencies have followed. The main weakness is that the vehicle database used is not updated as regularly as officers hoped, Zumalt said.

Local ACLU officials said they are taking a wait-and-see approach on where the technology goes and whether data affecting innocent people is collected. "It's important that use of the technology is transparent and properly disclosed and available to the public," said Victoria Middleton, executive director of the ACLU South Carolina national office.

Police Cpl. Victor Buskirk, who works with the camera car, said the device has paid for itself in terms of recovering stolen vehicles and the dollar amount associated with them. Buskirk remembers driving home one night after a shift with the device on and catching a \$30,000 Mustang that a rental agency had reported stolen months earlier.