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Authorities seeking \$100,000 for cameras to help nab criminals

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While you're at the store hunting for groceries, Spartanburg police soon might be in the parking lot hunting for stolen cars and fugitives - and they could be running your license plate through a national crime database to do so.

Tag recognition technology, which the Spartanburg Public Safety Department hopes to buy with part of its anticipated allotment of federal stimulus dollars, is a relatively new, powerful and somewhat controversial way of fighting crime.

The cameras - three vehicles will be fitted with three each, and the city police hope to install a 10th in a stationary position - are able to rapidly photograph scores of license plates, upload the data to a national database and immediately alert officers if the vehicle has been involved in a crime or belongs to someone suspected of criminal activity.

The flip side, privacy advocates argue, is that without proper controls in place, the information can fall into the wrong hands or be used for the wrong purposes.

Spartanburg police Maj. Doug Horton pointed to the tag recognition cameras now being used by the North Charleston Police Department as a model for the application of the technology here.

The department has requested about \$100,000 to pay for the cameras.

Because officers don't have to physically call in every license plate, and running those tags through a national database is automatic, one officer on an eight-hour shift can go from running about 100 plates to nearly 2,500, said Deputy Chief William Barfield in North Charleston.

That department has been using tag recognition technology for about six months, and it already has recovered about 20 stolen vehicles, he said.

"In car theft alone, the information has been well worth its value," Barfield told the Herald-Journal. "It's kind of a pricey item. ... But when you recover 20 vehicles that are stolen, that's a huge deal. And that's just part of the equation."

North Charleston uses PlateScan technology, one of four companies that Spartanburg police are considering.

"It's constantly downloading tag information," Barfield said. "It's only uploading the information that's inquired about - like stolen vehicles. Let's say you're at a shooting, and a witness is only able to get a partial tag of '123.' You can type into the system, give me all the tags with '123' in them. Let's say the car was in a parking lot two weeks ago. It can tell you the address."

But some worry the potential for abuse calls for strict oversight of its use.

One patrolman, for instance, told the Post & Courier in Charleston that the cameras were so useful, they were almost addictive - and that he was tempted to drive through parking lots off-duty to see what he could find.

Victoria Middleton, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union in South Carolina, acknowledged that tag recognition technology has a legitimate law enforcement purpose - as long as it is narrowly tailored to that purpose and properly supervised.

"The problem is that it is a technology that can, in a sense, outstrip the law or the supervision, and we need statutory controls to make sure it's not used in an abused way to record systematically the times that an individual's in a particular location, or to make sure this data is not shared with private companies. And those possibilities always exist," Middleton said.

"There really aren't very many, if any, standards or guidelines or controls in place. If the authorities maintain records of people's locations ... it means people's movement in a car can be tracked and recorded. And this would be a reduction in privacy, which is one of our cherished civil liberties, and something that we usually take for granted. We shouldn't take for granted that there will be no abuses of the technology. We need to make sure there is proper supervision and control."

Barfield said his department was concerned about that, too.

"As long as you have policies that restrict abuse - and whenever you have a human, there's a chance of that - but you put plans in place, policies in place, you try to limit that with checks and balances," Barfield said. "Other places in other parts of the country have dealt with that, and we've tried to listen to them. So, we're prepared for that as best we can."

Horton said the use of the technology here would be aboveboard.

"There is no expectation of privacy on a tag, sir," he said. "We run tags every day. What's the difference? This technology has been used across the country, and overseas a bit. The ACLU's brought that up, but we've not seen that any indication that it would violate anyone's privacy. It's an enforcement tool, not a snooping tool."

