

Flemington police: New device checks 2,500 license plates in a 12-hour shift

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[FLEMINGTON](#) — People wanted on warrants would be well advised to drive someone else's car through the borough. Or just surrender.

In the course of a 12-hour shift the Police Department's new license-plate reader will scan 2,500 license plates, explains Sgt. Jerry Rotella. "What this (device) does in a day, it'd probably take me a year and half to do, typing in license plates by hand."

The machine was purchased from Vigilant Solutions of Livermore, Calif. It consists of three cameras that are temporarily mounted on a cruiser's trunk lid. One checks oncoming vehicles, one checks vehicles that have just gone by, and a third checks vehicles to the right that are parked or in the slow lane. Each camera has an infra-red component, so it can scan plates in total darkness with equal ease. Pennsylvanians are not exempt from scrutiny.

The cameras are linked to a computer in the trunk, which in turn is linked to the regular onboard cop computer. It chimes each time it scans a clean plate, and the onboard computer screen shows the plate, a photo of the vehicle, the latitude and longitude, the date and the time.

When it scans a problematic plate, it makes a siren sound, flashes red and a voice indicates the level of the problem. The screen shows whether the registration is expired, the vehicle has been reported stolen or involved in a crime, or whether the owner has an expired license or is wanted on a warrant. It also provides additional information that's linked to the registration.

A police officer can also type in his or her own BOLO (be on the lookout) for a license plate.

The tag reader has the brain power to evaluate 1,600 plates an hour and the visual acuity to read a plate at 120 mph — a useful ability when a cruiser is doing 60 and so is oncoming traffic.

Flemington officers have been using the tag reader for a couple of weeks. It is deployed on every shift, says Rotella, and it is compiling lots of data about what car was where and when.

Rotella said that by directive of the state attorney general, Flemington has to keep the data it compiles for five years, but it cannot just sort through it on a whim. In 2010 the attorney general issued rules for its use.

The [recent robbery of Roman Jewelers](#) inspired Rotella to sketch a scenario in which that data could be used. If the tag reader had been in use for awhile, and if the authorities knew a license number of a vehicle involved, police could access the stored data to see if that vehicle had been seen in the jewelry store parking lot prior to the robbery. It could help build a case.

Rotella said that as far as he knows, the Clinton Township police force is the only other one in the county that has a license plate reader.

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