

Testimony of Gersh Kuntzman.pdf

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Testimony of Gersh Kuntzman
Editor in Chief, Streetsblog
Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2024

Hello, senators. I am Gersh Kuntzman, a longtime New York journalist and currently the editor of the transportation news site, Streetsblog.

Over the last three years, I have intensely covered the growing problem of drivers who deface or cover their license plates to avoid being held accountable for their recklessness.

First, how reckless are drivers? In New York City, the 2,000 speed cameras issued 5.9 million tickets in 2023 — roughly 16,250 per day — to people driving 11 miles per hour or more above the speed limit. And New York City's red-light cameras — which are at fewer than 1 percent of intersections — issued more than 704,000 tickets, or roughly 1,930 per day.

But there's a snake in this enforcement Eden: drivers who seek to evade accountability.

Initially, unreadable plates comprised just 1 percent of the cars that triggered speed cameras. But by August 2022, the number of unreadable plates had jumped to more than 7 percent, [as Streetsblog reported](#).

Subsequently, the city comptroller pointed out a bigger problem [with covered or defaced plates](#): in 2023, more than *41 percent* of speed camera images captured by Verra Mobility, which runs our speed camera program, are thrown out even before the images can be adjudicated. The report concluded that more than 1 million speeding incidents could not be processed because of covered or fake plates.

That number is likely to rise as drivers find more ways to trick the cameras. For instance, online retailers such as Amazon and Ebay are filled with offers of customizable metal plates for just \$20. And souvenir shops all over Manhattan are selling cheap metal plates for \$9. I brought one with me — a fairly obvious fake, no matter how attractive you find me. This plate was caught three times last year by city cameras. Where were the tickets mailed? Who knows?

In New York State, no points are assessed against a driver's license when a driver is caught operating a car with fake or covered plates. Currently, the maximum fine is just \$200, which most drivers think is just the cost of doing business, given how rarely they're caught.

Additionally, camera-issued tickets do not carry points — even though 10s of thousands of drivers have accumulated enough tickets to have their license revoked ... if the tickets were written by an officer instead of a camera. Drivers simply evade accountability by paying the \$50 tickets.

Efforts to tighten the rules have failed. In 2022, a state senator wanted the Department of Motor Vehicles to inform insurance companies of drivers getting excessive tickets and to allow speed camera tickets to count on a driver's record.

But those safety provisions were eliminated from the final bill; drivers said they found such accountability too "punitive." Whatever happened to "Safety first"? So often, safety is far down on the list of legislative priorities.

Fortunately, this legislature has a chance to add teeth to existing laws outlawing defacing or obscuring one's plate. That is, unless you capitulate to reckless drivers who are targeting our children and our neighbors and our friends.

I'm happy to answer any questions. Thanks.

2024 Testimony - Defaced License Plates - SB10.pdf

Uploaded by: Sen. Cheryl Kagan

Position: FAV



THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

SB10: Defaced License Plates

Judicial Proceedings Committee

January 31, 2024 at 1:00 PM

Defaced license plates can make vehicles nearly undetectable to enforcement technology. Although tinted license plate covers were outlawed in 1995 in my first bill ([Md. Code, Transp. § 13-411.1](#)), the problem of illegible plates has recently escalated. This issue poses significant challenges in:

- Identifying red light violators;
- Effectively utilizing speed cameras;
- Solving hit-and-run accidents;
- Tracking down gas station pump-and-run perpetrators;
- Finding suspects with outstanding warrants;
- Locating missing persons through Amber & Silver Alerts; and
- Charging tolls for those without an E-ZPass.

Obscured license plates not only compromise safety but also divert revenue. According to a study by the AAA Foundation, speed cameras contributed [\\$64 million](#) to Maryland's revenue in 2018. Combined with red light cameras, it is estimated that enforcement cameras now generate at least \$100 million annually for the State. Illegible license plates are also problematic for toll collection, which uses cameras to charge those without E-ZPasses.

For reference, [7.38%](#) of license plates captured by enforcement cameras in New York City were unreadable in August of 2022, costing [\\$3,294,746](#). Ultimately, the City lost [\\$46 million](#) in revenue from uncollected tolls in 2022 alone.

To address these challenges, [SB10](#) proposes the following penalties:

- For a first offense, a warning; and
- For a second or subsequent offense, 3 points will be assessed.

While some license plates are intentionally obscured to evade cameras, others become illegible through natural deterioration. SB10 proposes a replacement program for any standard-issue license plates over 15 years old, expanding an existing MVA pilot program.

Twenty-four other states¹ have enacted similar legislation.

The following amendments to SB10 have been requested:

- Special plates should be exempt from the MVA replacement program; and

¹ [AZ](#), [CA](#), [FL](#), [GA](#), [IL](#), [IN](#), [LA](#), [MI](#), [MN](#), [MS](#), [NE](#), [NV](#), [NH](#), [NJ](#), [NY](#), [NC](#), [ND](#), [PA](#), [SC](#), [SD](#), [TX](#), [UT](#), [WA](#), & [WV](#)

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Joint Audit and Evaluation Committee
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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

- There will be a 60-day grace period following a warning.

I urge a favorable report on SB10 as amended.

SB0010 - MDTA and MVA - Damaged, Obscured, or Modi

Uploaded by: Patricia Westervelt

Position: FWA

January 31, 2024

The Honorable William C. Smith, Jr.
Chair, Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
2 East, Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis MD 21401

RE: Letter of Support with Amendments – Senate Bill 10 – Vehicle Laws - Damaged, Obscured, or Modified Registration Plates

Dear Chair Smith and Committee Members:

The Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) supports Senate Bill 10 with amendments and offers the following information for the Committee's consideration.

With respect to the operations of the Maryland Transportation Authority's (MDTA) EZ-Pass program, when a vehicle owner obscures or modifies their license plate, these actions can result in lost revenue due to either the notice of tolls due (NOTD) being sent to the incorrect customer or no transaction taking place as no vehicle owner can be identified. For reference, 388,295 and 380,491 obstructed plates were reported in calendar year 2022 and 2023 respectively. With respect to the penalty structure, current law affords law enforcement the discretion to issue either a warning or citation when a violation occurs, rather than requiring a penalty based on the number of offenses. Given that all law enforcement agencies in the State do not utilize the same citation reporting program, the current law would be preferred to allow law enforcement to make determinations on a case-by-case basis.

The MDOT Motor Vehicle Administration (MVA) has recently implemented an optional plate replacement program similar to the one outlined in Senate Bill 10. The pilot program informs all Class A and Class M vehicle owners that have standard issue plates fifteen years or older that they are eligible for replacement at no charge. During registration renewal, eligible customers have the option to indicate that they would like to replace their vehicle plates or continue to keep their existing plates. The MVA would support an amendment that would remove the requirement to provide replacement plates for Class D, Class E, Class G, Class L, and Class N vehicles and trailers in addition to special registration tags under Transportation Article § 13-619.2 as currently required in the bill. This will align the legislation with the current pilot program.

For these reasons, the Maryland Department of Transportation respectfully requests the Committee grant Senate Bill 10 a favorable report with the amendments described above.

Respectfully submitted,

Pilar Helm
Director of Government Affairs
Maryland Department of Transportation
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