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Ways and Means Committee
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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
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Testimony in Support of HB 1166
Motor Vehicles - Dealers - Front Registration Plate Display

Maryland is one of 28 states that requires vehicles to display both a front and rear license plate. Unfortunately, some Maryland motorists do not comply with state law. This poses a threat to public safety as well as causes the State to lose out on toll revenues. HB 1166 would make it easier for Maryland drivers to comply with state law by requiring vehicles sold in Maryland to have a front plate holder installed at the time of sale or lease.

Background

Maryland state law requires two license plates for most vehicles. Not displaying a front license plate is a misdemeanor, subject to a fine of up to \$500. Thousands of citations are issued each year in Maryland for failure to display a front license plate. In 2024, over 8,000 citations were issued.

Although some car owners are willfully breaking the law by choosing not to install a front license plate, others are simply unaware of the law or struggling to comply when their new car does not have a front plate holder installed by the auto dealer.

Threats to Public Safety

Front license plates serve an important public safety function by making it easier for law enforcement or a witness to a crime to see the license plate number. This information aids in law enforcement investigations, in the pursuit of hit and run cases, and during AMBER and Silver alerts.

The Maryland State Police stated in recent testimony to the House Environment and Transportation Committee that “From a public safety perspective, the additional front plate is a pivotal component for investigators, enabling officers and civilian witnesses across the state to easily identify and report vehicles suspected of involvement in criminal activities, missing-person cases, hit-and-run collisions, or other motor vehicle-related investigations.”

Impacts on Toll Revenues

Front license plates are also an important part of Maryland's video tolling system. When a vehicle's E-ZPass is not detected or read, then imagery of the vehicle's plates is needed to bill the motorist for their toll. According to the Maryland Transportation Authority, during 2024 there were 15.1 million transactions for which a license plate was used to invoice the vehicle owner. Although use of imagery of the rear plate is standard, it is not always visible, such as if the vehicle is towing a trailer or has a bike rack obscuring the rear plate. Consequently, 43% of the time front license plate information was used to identify and invoice the vehicle owner. Without front license plates, the State would have lost the ability to invoice 6.6 million transactions totaling \$35 million in toll revenue.

What This Bill Does

HB 1166 would make it easier for Marylanders who are buying or leasing a vehicle to comply with the state's front license plate law. The bill would require licensed auto dealers to equip vehicles with a front license plate bracket or mounting mechanism prior to delivering the vehicle to the customer. The bill includes an opt out mechanism: the buyer or lessee could sign a written acknowledgement that they refused installation and that they understand that Maryland law requires a front license plate. The bill also requires sellers to report to the MVA information about customers who sign this acknowledgment and refuse installation.

This legislation is modeled after a California law that has required similar compliance and disclosures since 2004. California's long standing approach demonstrates that this policy is workable.

Please note that I will be providing the Committee with the following amendments:

- Limit to just the sale or lease of new vehicles, not used vehicles
- Limit to just vehicles that are being sold/leased and registered in Maryland (i.e. the bill doesn't apply to non-residents)
- Clarify that in addition to mounted hardware, other front plate display mechanisms are allowed (e.g. a clip on bracket or an adhesive bracket)
- Change the reporting requirements to the Motor Vehicle Administration (MVA). Instead of a monthly report from the dealer to the MVA, the dealer will send the signed waivers when the vehicle registration paperwork is submitted to the MVA.

This legislation will help Marylanders to abide by the law, will preserve our toll revenues, and will help our public safety officials to do their job.