Californians Overwhelmingly Support Use Of License Plate Readers, New Survey Finds

The majority of Californians agree that license plate reader (LPR)technology helps law enforcement solve crimes and any restrictions on who can photograph license plates would be unacceptable, according to a new poll conducted by Zogby Analytics and commissioned by Vigilant Solutions. The poll of 800 California residents, conducted during the first week in April, showed overwhelming support for the benefits of LPR technology and disdain for government limits on personal and corporate photography.

By more than a 6:1 margin, California residents said that they believe that license plate recognition technology helps to solve crimes. In addition, more than 60 percent of Californians agree that license plates are designed for public display and there should be no restrictions on whether someone can photograph them. The survey shows little public support for many aspects of a pending bill in the California State Senate – SB 893 – that would prohibit private use of LPR data.

A similar law in Utah was recently amended after a First Amendment challenge. The First Amendment argument resonates with Californians who en masse – 66 percent – agreed that there is no justification for any law that violates the First Amendment rights of citizens or companies.

Further, only five percent of respondents said that LPR has no benefits and should be abolished.

"LPR has been a critical tool that has helped law enforcement solve thousands of violent crimes and enabled insurance and financial services companies to re-possess stolen and delinquent vehicles, resulting in the reduction of insurance premiums and other fees for their customers in good standing," said Shawn Smith, founder and CEO of Vigilant Solutions.

LPR technology captures an image of a license plate, a date/time stamp, the location of the image capture and then uses software to convert license plate numbers and letters into a computer readable text format.

LPR data collected, stored or provided to private companies by Digital Recognition Network and to law enforcement by Vigilant Solutions is anonymous in the sense that it does not contain personally identifiable information – unlike a picture of the face of a celebrity or even a private individual in public.

LPR technology is already regulated by federal law — The Drivers Privacy Protection Act (DPPA) — which sets firm limits on when and how anonymous, public license plate data can be connected to personally-identifiable Department of Motor Vehicle data. Unless a LPR user has access to the federally protected vehicle registration data, there is to link the LPR data to an actual person.

California residents overwhelmingly believe a federal law maximizes the benefits of LPR while limiting any invasion of personal privacy. Nearly 29 percent said that existing federal law is enough while an additional 43 percent said the DPPA should be strengthened to place some additional privacy protections to further prevent stalking and other crimes. [...]