GHOST CAR GOVERNANCE

A PLAN TO CURB FRAUDULENT, OBSTRUCTED, AND PHANTOM PLATES

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Fraudulent, Fake, and Defaced License Plates

Unsafe, Unfair, Unenforced

Defaced, obstructed, and fraudulent license plates are plaguing New York City's streets, posing a serious challenge to law enforcement and regulatory agencies. License plates that are scratched out, obscured by tinted or reflective license plate covers, or altogether fake make detecting and penalizing ghost cars nearly impossible. As the City and State increasingly rely on cameras for the enforcement of speed, tolls, curb management, and more, the proliferation of fraudulent and defaced plates severely compromises the enforcement of traffic laws and collection of tolls.

Each month, more than 5% of vehicles passing through speed cameras, red light cameras, and toll stations operated by the NYC Department of Transportation, Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, and Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority are unreadable. Over 100,000 license plate images passing through DOT-operated cameras alone are unreadable every month – and the number of unreadable plates increases each month. In total, there are hundreds of millions of dollars in tickets, fines, and tolls from enforcement cameras that go unpaid for such things as speeding, running red lights, and evading tolls every year.

This trend is growing and threatens New Yorkers' safety. We must ensure that every vehicle has a readable and valid license plate.

To address this challenge, the Manhattan Borough President's Office proposes a series of recommendations that will hinder bad actors' ability to obtain fake and fraudulent plates and provide law enforcement with the tools necessary to properly enforce traffic law.

Improve Enforcement of Illegally Obstructed, Defaced, and Fraudulent License Plates

Adopt next-generation digital license plates in New York State

The New York State Department of Motor Vehicles should put radio frequency identification (RFID) tags or other digital technology on each registration sticker. These tags would be easily read by radio receivers that could be added to cameras used for tolls, speed enforcement, red light enforcement and parking enforcement, ensuring that license plates properly match the vehicle identification number (VIN) and registration associated with that vehicle, so that the toll or fine can be properly collected.

The federal government should adopt requirements that digital tags be installed on every vehicle during manufacture, thereby helping to reduce fraud and make enforcement possible regardless of the state from which a vehicle is registered.

Provide every NYPD traffic enforcement officer with training and equipment to recognize and ticket fraudulent or obstructed plates

Every enforcement officer on the street should have the training and hand-held tools to recognize fraudulent plates, identify plates that don't match the vehicle, run those plates through the DMV, and ticket or impound cars as necessary, all from the curb. This will vastly improve the ability of NYPD to properly and efficiently enforce against bad actors on the street.

Increase the use of AI tools to accurately identify partial plate matches and obstructed plates

Artificial intelligence and machine learning can help camera enforcement operators match partially obstructed plates to properly registered vehicles and vehicle owners. Currently, as many as 5% of license plate pictures are "unreadable," requiring the use of tools that can match and help locate vehicles with partial plates based on additional information collected by cameras, including car make, model, and color.

Increase fines and penalties for vehicle owners caught with fraudulent or obstructed license plates

Enforcement officers should be empowered to remove illegal license plate covers on parked vehicles. Additionally, vehicles with fraudulent license plates should be booted when parked, and immediately seized when being operated without a valid registration. Minimum fines for obstructed or fraudulent plates should be vastly increased to a minimum $150 per offense, and points should be put on licenses for driving improperly registered cars.

Stop the sale of fraudulent and temporary plates and covers

Fraudulent license plates, as well as license plate covers, are easily purchased online on platforms like Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace, Instagram, and TikTok. Some businesses are selling completely fake plates, while others are selling "dead" plates -- real metal license plates no longer registered to any vehicle that are impossible to recognize as fraudulent at a glance.

Though the sale of products designed to conceal or obscure licenses will be illegal come September 1, 2024, we need strong enforcement tools in place to stop illegal sales. State and local law enforcement agencies should be prepared to aggressively fine and close retailers who sell these products illegally.

Amend Outdated State and City Policies that Prevent Enforcement

Create a traffic and parking enforcement equity task force

This task force should conduct a comprehensive study of current parking and traffic enforcement policies and patterns. Increasing reporting to 311 on paper tags and license plate obstruction will provide key data about enforcement patterns and where there are gaps in proper enforcement. Lessons from this study should be used to better target violations that are particularly unsafe or inequitably enforced.

Create a residential parking permit program

The State should give New York City the power to create a residential parking permit program. Such a program could be tailored to meet the needs of each neighborhood and would help better manage our curb space, raise badly needed revenue for neighborhood upgrades, and help crack down on fraudulent car registrations.

Create enforcement reciprocity agreements between neighboring states

Poor collaboration and data sharing between New York and other states is leading to serious challenges in holding accountable repeat toll-evaders from out of state. Though New York State has enforcement reciprocity agreements with Massachusetts, there are no agreements with New Jersey or Pennsylvania, meaning many tools to enforce the law are unavailable. New York State, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania should enter into agreements that allow each state to properly enforce traffic and registration laws in their states, regardless of a driver's home state.