October 27, 2004

GETTING THERE

A Smarter License: What Can It Tell?

By MATTHEW L. WALD

WASHINGTON -- THE driver's license, that ubiquitous piece of plastic that people show millions of times a day for everything from buying a bottle of liquor to getting on an airplane — and even, occasionally, for proving to a police officer that the bearer is allowed behind the steering wheel — is going high tech.

Apply for a license in Oklahoma, and a computer will scan your digitized photo, convert it to a series of numbers, and then compare the results with every other photo already on file in the state motor vehicle department's database, to make sure you do not already have a license under some other name.

Many states now repeat all of the printed information digitally, using a bar code or a magnetic stripe or both. In Michigan, the digital information even includes what is known as a "digital watermark," so any tampering will be detectable.

The trend is still in its early stages. Virginia held a hearing earlier this month on putting computer chips into its licenses, which could store fingerprints or eye prints. Civil libertarians fear the next step is a radio-frequency identification card, akin to an E-ZPass or smart card used to pay subway fares. This would let anyone with the right equipment read a license while it was still in its owner's wallet.

"There are technology solutions coming out of the woodwork," said Anne S. Ferro, who was Maryland's administrator for drivers' licenses from 1997 until last year. Most are hand-me-downs that have already been employed for identity cards issued by the military and by intelligence agencies.

But progress is far from even. Until July 1, Vermont was the last state to routinely issue licenses with no photo at all. About 100,000 of the state's half million drivers have chosen to keep their "no photo" licenses, and they are free to renew them indefinitely, said Bonnie L. Rutledge, the commissioner of motor vehicles.

Until recently, New Jersey's licenses could be reproduced by anybody with a good computer printer and a laminating machine. They were long a favorite of young people who wanted licenses they could doctor to establish that they were of legal drinking age.

Now New Jersey has begun a four-year phase-in period for new licenses with various refinements. One is that the name and date of birth are printed not only conventionally on the paper inside the lamination, but also in ink that shows up only under ultraviolet light.

The move to make drivers' licenses more sophisticated was driven in the 1990's by emerging crimes like identity theft, but gained momentum after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The 9/11 commission, which in its final report called identification cards "the last opportunity to ensure that
people are who they say they are and to check whether they are terrorists," said the federal government should set standards for issuing birth certificates and drivers' licenses.

Even before the commission report, many state officials were saying the same thing, that they should tighten their procedures. In January 2003, the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators published a report recommending that states using an applicant's Social Security number no longer simply copy the number from a card or other document. Instead, they should check the number with the Social Security Administration.

Some experts say that even without the threat of terrorism, there is plenty of reason to improve the system of issuing licenses. "Not only does it have homeland security implications, it has serious highway safety implications," said Jason King, a spokesman for the motor vehicle administrators' group. Of the 43,000 people killed on American roads in an average year, about a fifth, or 8,600, die in crashes involving a driver who is "improperly licensed," he said. That often means the license was revoked in one state, and the driver fraudulently obtained a new license in another state, Mr. King said, because there is no national database that states can use to determine if an applicant has a license elsewhere.

"The American public should be outraged to know D.M.V.'s nationwide lack the capability to do the jobs we've asked them to do," he said.

In recent years the federal government has tried to track everyone with a driver's license for an entirely different reason: unpaid child support. The goal is to find divorced parents with unpaid obligations who move from one state to another.

A different problem exists for the people who look at drivers' licenses, from police officers to airport security personnel: determining whether licenses are valid. There are about 240 different licenses in use in the 50 states, the District of Columbia and various territories, including provisional licenses for young people and in places like New Jersey and Vermont, newly introduced licenses and older licenses that are still valid.

"It's really very difficult, without the ability to read something like a watermark, to determine if it's a real driver's license," said Reed Stager, a vice president of the Digimarc Corporation, which supplies drivers' licenses to many states, 10 of which use watermarks.

Civil libertarians argue, though, that as drivers' licenses become standardized, the country is moving toward a national identification card. And by checking the cards at numerous locations, the government could easily keep track of citizens' movements.

"Once you get a national ID, you know there's going to be an expansion beyond just government use," said Marv Johnson, the American Civil Liberties Union's legislative counsel in Washington. "It's going to become the gold standard for information exchange. Private entities are going to want to see your national ID card. They're going to have their own readers to read the data."