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OPPOSITION TESTIMONY

on

H. B. No. 71

by

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am John Gilchrist and I am here to express the Ohio Association of Chiefs of Police opposition to H. B. 71. As you know, the bill would provide that the failure to display a front license plate is a secondary offense with a maximum fine of \$100 for a violation. In fact, the Association is opposed to any legislation that would eliminate the front license plate or seek to chip away at the front license plate requirement. We opposed the provision in the Transportation Budget bill (H. B. No. 26) which was recently enacted—it amends Section 4503.21 to make it a secondary offense for failure to have a front license plate on a vehicle that is legally parked. The offense is a minor misdemeanor with a fine of not more than one hundred dollars. The Association also opposed the provision in the last budget bill (H. B. No. 64) which amended Section 4503.181 to provide for the elimination of the front license plate on historical vehicles. The Association also has concerns with H. B. No. 188 which would permit specialty kit vehicles to only have a rear plate. Even though the provisions only eliminate the front license plate in certain circumstances, the Association believes these enactments erode the argument for maintaining a second plate in the broad sense.

By making failure to have a front license plate a secondary offense, the officer cannot stop the offender unless the individual has committed another offense for which the operator is cited. The low fine and making it a secondary offense will encourage people not to attach the front license plate. In addition, This gives the message that the front license plate is not considered as necessary as a public safety measure or a tool useful to law enforcement.

This is contrary to the finding issued by the License Plate Safety Task Force created by H. B. No. 59 of the 130th General Assembly. The committee had the task of examining whether having dual license plates is beneficial to law enforcement and to also determine whether the state should continue its dual license plate requirement. After three hearings the Task Force recommended that Ohio should maintain the current law of requiring two license plates because they are a useful tool for law enforcement.

In addition, pursuant to the Task Force's final report, 31 states currently have two license plates. Also, two states (Connecticut and Massachusetts) have returned to using two license plates

and Michigan had introduced a bill in late October 2013 to require dual license plates.

The front license plate is a critical law enforcement tool used in a variety of situations—from auto theft investigations, DUI enforcement, hit/skip crashes, to bank robbery and even homicide investigations. When investigating these various situations, law enforcement officers rely upon eyewitness accounts and physical evidence to track down drivers who damage property, commit various criminal offenses, or injure or kill other motorists. Again, in all of these various situations, the front license plate is sometimes the only lead an officer possesses.

The front license plate is also valuable to law enforcement when captured by video surveillance at convenience stores and gas stations where crimes like robberies occur. In fact, the Association believes that the front license plate and the existence of these surveillance cameras serve as a deterrent. The front license plate is also of value when License Plate Readers are used—they often assist in solving crimes that would otherwise have become cold cases.

State law requires school bus drivers to report violations of motorists passing a stopped school bus to law enforcement. Removing the front license plate will be a step backward with regard to being able to identify both the driver and the vehicle when a motorist violated a stopped school bus. It should be noted that many school buses are equipped with cameras.

Neighborhood block watch groups and uniformed police volunteer programs often rely upon both front and rear license plates to report suspicious vehicles or activities. Also, many government entities and private businesses have photo cameras in parking lot, in front of their businesses, and other locations. These cameras often capture the license plates of criminals. The front license plate may be the only reflective material on the front of a vehicle. At night, this feature allows drivers to spot oncoming left-of-center vehicles with one or both headlights out (drunk drivers occasionally fail to turn on their headlights). It also allows motorist to spot vehicles at night which have become disabled on the road due to a crash or mechanical failure.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify the exact value of having two license plates. How do you place a value on removing a rapist, thief, or murderer from the streets? What is it worth to the victims or their families? What is it worth to remove drunk drivers from the roads? What is it worth to arrest drivers who fail to stop for school buses unloading children coming home from school? In short, having the front license plates provides an additional tool for law enforcement. In addition, there is value in seeing a vehicle's plates both coming and going.

Lastly, the Association believes that the vast majority of vehicle owners give little thought to the fact that two plates are required—they simply take it for granted that Ohio vehicles have two plates. It appears that elimination of the front license plate is being undertaken to accommodate a very small vocal group that wants to eliminate the front plate.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, in 1982 the Ohio Association of Chiefs of Police and the Pennsylvania Chiefs of Police Association had a joint research project commissioned: it was a comparative analysis of police officer attitudes toward single and dual license plates. (Pennsylvania has one plate) Four thousand questionnaires were mailed to officers in the two states

(2000 per state) asking about their attitude toward a single vs. dual license plates. Among its many conclusions, the survey indicated that police in both states agree that the identification of a vehicle is aided by the presence of a front plate. We admit that this research project is more than thirty years old, yet it does indicate that officers in both Ohio and Pennsylvania see the value in having two license plates. (See note 1 below)

Mr. Chairman, we would like to respond to the proponents' contention that affixing the front license plate could be problematic in vehicles with bumper sensors. Newer vehicle models have many computer type components throughout the vehicle that mechanics work around when making various repairs. If they can work around these, the Association believes they can easily work around a bumper sensor when applying a license plate bracket. Please remember, some 30 plus states require two plates and mechanics in these states appear to be able to work around the sensors.

Note 1: One of the many conclusions from the report is the following: "Most supportive of dual license plates are Ohio officers who currently work under a two plate system. Specifically, three-quarters (74%) of Ohio officers claim that a front plate is "very important." In Pennsylvania, where officers have experience with single license plates, over half (58%) rate the presence of two plates as being "very important." These two findings indicate that there is strong support among states currently with two plates and those with one plate for dual plate systems. However, when these findings are considered together, it appears that officers who are exposed frequently to two license plates express greater concern for the presence of a front license plate relative to their counterparts who deal with single plates on a regular basis. Thus, the comparatively less enthusiastic rating of the importance of dual plates by Pennsylvania officers is apparently due to having accepted the limitations of a single plate." (A Comparative Analysis of Police Officer Attitudes Toward Single and Dual License Plates. The report was prepared for the Ohio Association of Chiefs of Police and the Pennsylvania Chiefs of Police by Market Opinion Research, December 1982)