

Town on SF Bay wants to photograph every car

July 20 2009, By MICHELLE LOCKE , Associated Press Writer



In this photo taken on Wednesday, July 15, 2009, a group of children play outside the Lyford House at the Richardson Bay Audubon Center & Sanctuary in Tiburon, Calif. Tiburon, a town of 8,000 in Marin County, is proposing to record license plates of people entering and leaving town. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

(AP) -- Visitors should be prepared to have their pictures taken as they enter and leave this picturesque town of million-dollar views and homes along the San Francisco Bay.

Officials want to photograph every car and use the license plate information to solve crimes in the town of 9,000. Critics see the plan as an intrusion into the rights of visitors, but proponents say it is a sensible precaution that absolutely will not cross privacy lines.

"As long as you don't arrive in a stolen vehicle or go on a crime spree

while you're here, your [anonymity](#) will be preserved," said Town Manager Peggy Curran. "We don't care who you are and we don't know who you are."

Cameras are already watching Americans as they drive, bank and shop, and police around the country routinely use cameras to enforce speeding and traffic violations and spot stolen cars.

But Tiburon's plan may be a little different if only because its geography - laid out on a narrow peninsula with only two roads in and out - makes it possible to keep a close eye on everyone who comes to town.

Melissa Ngo, a privacy rights attorney and consultant who publishes [privacylives.com](#), said she is not aware of a situation where a town is keeping a record of all visitors.

"The point is we live in a land where people are considered innocent until proven guilty," Ngo said. "Not a land where it's supposed to be - prove that you're not doing anything wrong by letting us watch you do everything."

Curled on the edge of the [San Francisco Bay](#) in Marin County, Tiburon is not a high-crime spot. In 2008, police report there were 99 thefts, 20 burglaries and two auto thefts.

That was not a significant change from the year before. But police say with most of the crimes taking place at night, and suspects identified so far as out-of-towners with criminal records, they believe having the license plate information would be helpful in solving crimes.

The issue has prompted debate on the trade-off between private freedoms and public security.

Walking his dogs along Tiburon's stunning waterfront on a recent sunny morning, Bill McDougal, who lives in nearby Sausalito, was not enthusiastic about the license plate plan. "It's one more step to Big Brother," he said.

But Brooke Togmazzini, owner of a wine tasting room near the waterfront, said that while she initially had qualms about the system, she has become convinced there are enough safeguards in place to make it nothing more than a useful investigative tool.

"There isn't someone watching every car that comes in and out," she said.

Curran believes the proposal, expected to go before the Town Council for final approval within a few months, has been misunderstood.

If they go forward, officials intend to set clear limitations on how the license plate database can be used. For instance, they said the system will not be used for traffic enforcement, and the data will not be public record - no trying to find out if a spouse has been wandering.

The way the system would work is still cameras set up at town entry points will take a photograph of license plates - but not drivers. License plate numbers collected would be erased within 30 to 60 days and would not be viewed unless there is a crime to solve.

Officers would search for plates of vehicles in town at the time of the crime that are connected to someone with a criminal history. Any hits would be used as leads.

"There'd be just none of the real-time monitoring that people worry about or that we're somehow wanting to be unfriendly or discourage visitors in any way," Curran said.

Civil liberties groups have concerns about the data being collected on Americans.

A 2007 study by California affiliates of the American Civil Liberties Union of 131 jurisdictions found that 37 cities in the state had some type of video surveillance program and 18 cities had significant surveillance of public streets and plazas.

Lee Tien, senior staff attorney for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, appreciates Tiburon officials' efforts to limit the use of the license plate database.

But he is still not sold on the idea.

"The logic is always, well, wait a minute. If you keep pushing this, then that means we should track everyone just because some people might be bad guys. That's not the way I think America is supposed to be."

On the Net: <http://www.ci.tiburon.ca.us/>

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