

Tracking License Plates

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made the use of the scanners public information for the first time.

At a demonstration event last Wednesday, police displayed the technology and said they have increased the number of squad cars with the scanners from one to 16.

Police credit the scanners with giving them valuable tools in retrieving stolen vehicles quicker, and said they provide tremendous aid in outside investigations as well.

"In the last three months alone we have captured 70 vehicles that were wanted in connection with some type of crime, and that could include anything from a hit and run, to a robbery suspect, to even recently a rape suspect," said officer Garrett Dow.

Comparative to the manual method of running plates, the scanners allow officers to log significantly increase surveillance.

"You don't have to come to a stop to read a plate. The license plate reader is passive, so as the officer is driving down the road, with his hands on the wheel and looking out into traffic, the license plate reader is working," Dow said.

He estimates that the average officer logs around 100 plates a day, while the 16 scanner-equipped squad cars register the plates of upwards of 8,000 vehicles a day. They plan to continue expanding the number of squad cars with the technology.

Police said the license plate recordings are not shared with outside departments unless another bureau has reasonable suspicion that a specific car is linked to an ongoing criminal investigation. Portland has logged more than three million license plates through the system, more than Portland-Metro area's number of registered motor vehicles combined.

The constantly updated database immediately alerts officers if a scanned plate might be connected with a crime. The data is retained for four years.

The ACLU says the scanners are a "single, high-resolution image of our lives."

"There's just a fundamental question of whether we're going to live in a society where these dragnet surveillance systems become routine," said Catherine Crump, a staff attorney with the organization. The group is proposing that police departments immediately delete any records of cars not linked to any crime.

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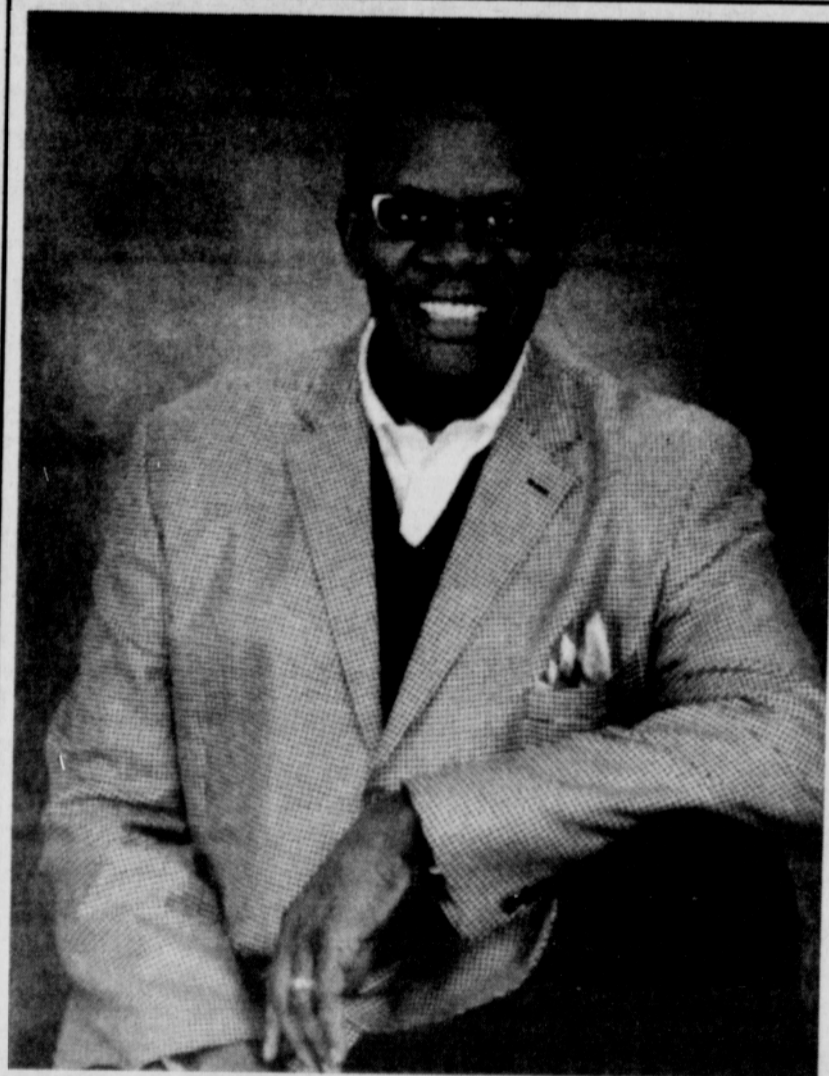
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