

State bill expands secret license plate program

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By BRIAN JOSEPH and JENNIFER MUIR / The Orange County Register

SACRAMENTO - Despite warnings of abuse, state lawmakers Monday renewed their efforts to expand a license plate program that masks the identity of government officials and can allow them to evade traffic laws.

On Monday, two bills to expand the controversial Department of Motor Vehicles program passed swiftly through the Assembly Transportation Committee with no discussion and only a couple of minutes of testimony. There was no opposition to the bills, although Orange County Assemblyman Jose Solorio, D-Santa Ana, voted "not voting" on both.

Last year, an Orange County Register investigation showed that the program, which conceals the home address of many government officials on DMV records, is rife with abuse.

The program was designed more than 30 years ago to protect police officers and their families from criminals seeking to find them through the DMV. Since then, state lawmakers have expanded the program to cover hundreds of thousands of public employees - from police dispatchers to museum guards to the legislators themselves.

The Register's investigation found that the safeguards are unnecessary today because updated laws make all DMV information confidential to the public. Furthermore, the Register discovered the program allows officials with protected plates to evade traffic tickets, or get off with a warning because their protected status signals to law enforcement that they are one of their own.

Those findings have been echoed by several legislative analysts. A new analysis by the Transportation Committee staff points out that several bills seeking to expand the program have been voted down in recent legislative sessions.

"It was decided that adding more groups to the list of those eligible for peace officer confidentiality served no useful purpose and was simply another administrative burden for state and local agencies," the analysis says. "In fact, most persons seeking confidential information about others no longer look to DMV records for the data since those records are so carefully protected and the sought-after information is so much more easily obtainable via the Internet."

On Monday, the Assembly committee approved Assembly Bill 592, by Assemblywoman Bonnie Lowenthal, D-Long Beach, which expands the program to about 100 Board of Equalization investigators.

The committee also approved AB 923, by Assemblyman Sandre Swanson, D-Alameda, which expands the program to code enforcement officers, zoo veterinarians, humane society shelter workers and the five elected members of the Board of Equalization.

Swanson proposed a similar bill last year, but it did not get out of the Assembly Appropriation Committee. The bill is sponsored by the union that represents those workers, the American Federation of County Municipal Employees.

Both bills now move to the appropriations committee.