Despite widespread use, N.C. law hazy on LPR cameras

KATHLEEN HOPEWELL NEWS-TIMES Sep 8, 2025 Updated Sep 9, 2025 2

Atlantic Beach license plate reader cameras raise privacy concerns among locals

ATLANTIC BEACH - "Yay! A surveillance state! That's what we all wanted, right?"

CARTERET COUNTY - Though they may be the first in the county to do so, Atlantic Beach is far from the first city in the state to install automatic LPR cameras.

In fact, The *Raleigh News and Observer* found, through a survey they administered from August 2023 through August 2024, that 896 LPR cameras were in use by 121 law enforcement agencies across 99 N.C. cities.

Despite their widespread use, there are no official mechanisms for oversight of LPR cameras in N.C., making it difficult to keep count of how many are in use, and ensure they are being used lawfully.

The N&O actually conducted its survey because no agency tracks the purchase or use of LPR cameras in the state. This is due, in part, to the fact that most, if not all, of the LPR cameras in N.C. were purchased through contracts between towns or law enforcement agencies and private companies.

The leading company in N.C. for LPR cameras, Flock Safety, did create "transparency portals," or optional websites that publicize generic information on the cameras' use, which is how the N&O was able to find over 80 of the agencies that use its cameras. Without public disclosure of these cameras, which are not required of law enforcement nor offered by other companies, only the companies themselves would know the number of agencies using LPR cameras.

Additionally, N.C. does have a law governing the use of LPR cameras. It requires police departments to establish policies on data use, oversight, self-audits and other matters before cameras are operational. The law additionally bars police from using LPR cameras to enforce traffic violations and only allows them to hold footage for 90 days, save for a few specific occasions.

Even with the requirements, the state does not have a way to ensure agencies abide by their policies, leaving oversight up to individual agencies, itself.

Flock Safety even enables law enforcement to request access to data from any police department in the country that uses their cameras, eliminating the need for search warrants to access information from other sources like cell phone towers or toll road cameras for investigations.

The N&O's data showed that law enforcement agencies using Flock Safety were sharing their cameras' footage with an average of 632 other law enforcement agencies, nationwide. N.C. agencies, alone, were sharing in-state footage with agencies across 35 other states, as well as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, US Postal Inspection Service and the Public Service Authority.

N.C. law threatens a Class 1 misdemeanor for misuse of LPR footage. But once N.C. agencies share their footage with law enforcement in other states or the federal government, there's nothing on the books governing how those outside of N.C. can use that footage.

In addition to the issues with lawful use of LPR cameras and interstate access to footage, the companies servicing the cameras have also run into legal issues.

After installing cameras in N.C. without a license from the N.C. Alarm Systems Licensing Board, Flock Safety was blocked by a Wake County Judge in 2023 from installing any further LPR cameras in the state, unless they did so through a licensed third-party. Flock Safety finally obtained a license in 2024, but only after arguing the company was not in the alarm systems business and, therefore, was not required to have a license to operate in the state.

Even with these concerns, the state legislature approved a pilot program between the Department of Transportation and State Bureau of Investigation in October 2023 to allow LPR cameras on state-owned right-of-ways. The program, beginning January 2024, was originally intended to end this summer, but it was extended to take place until July 2026.

Because of this pilot program, towns that independently obtain LPR cameras outside of the program are not permitted to place cameras on the NCDOT right-of-way and must, instead, install them on Town or private property—such is the case in Atlantic Beach. Additionally, they must also submit a Memorandum of Understanding to the SBI to gain access to the National Crime Information Center system for the cameras.

With the program, at least 80,000 miles of N.C. highways were deemed fair game for installing automatic LPR cameras in fixed locations.

It is unclear how many LPR cameras have been installed as a result of this program."

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Although there have been several articles in the Carteret News-Times about LPRs, with many questions and concerns, the AB Town Council and PD have offered little info to date. Hopefully, they will be more forthcoming on these surveillance instruments.

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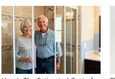

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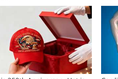

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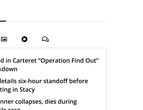

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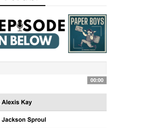

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