

Cities seize cars of tax delinquents

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New tool simplifies process for collectors

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NEW HAVEN, Conn. — Sam Byers heard a commotion outside his house, but by the time he got to the window his Ford Explorer was gone.

City marshals, armed with a new tool that photographs auto license plates and instantly matches them against a tax scofflaw database, had towed Byers' car right out of his driveway.

"That's like kidnapping your car," Byers, a 58-year-old truck driver said as he stood, leaning on the crutches he got after a foot operation. Byers was in a long line of people outside the New Haven tax collector's office who were waiting to make delinquent payments so they could get their vehicles back.

Cash-strapped New Haven is a pioneer in using the so-called BootFinder system. The objective: snare people who haven't paid car taxes. (Connecticut is among a handful of states where local governments levy annual fees, typically a few hundred dollars per vehicle, based on the value of residents' automobiles.)

New Haven officials are overjoyed at the results. They've towed about 1,800 cars and recovered more than \$1 million in delinquent taxes since the program began in September, including from people whose cars they removed from a Wal-Mart parking lot.

But privacy advocates are concerned.

High-tech tool

To them, BootFinder, originally developed to help police departments identify stolen cars, represents yet another ominous step in government surveillance of the citizenry.

The BootFinder system was first introduced for catching tax laggards by Arlington County, Va. So far, New Haven is the only other municipality using it, though Connecticut's largest city, Bridgeport, is among those considering a purchase.

The system is comprised of an infrared camera that rapidly scans license plates and, connected to a laptop computer in the New Haven system, scours a list of car tax delinquents. Previously, New Haven officials had to rely on mailed notices and phone calls to try to collect overdue car taxes.

The car tax collection rate, at 80 percent before BootFinder, has now risen to 95 percent, said C.J. Cuticello, New Haven's tax collector.

"I think the results are fantastic," he said. "We're going to continue it until we exhaust every vehicle in New Haven."

Huge success

Arlington County has had similar success, reaping about \$100,000 in unpaid car taxes and parking tickets since employing BootFinder despite not towing tax delinquents' cars. Its treasurer, Frank O'Leary, says the county is expanding the program this month to go after delinquent business and meals taxes owed by restaurant delivery companies.

"We're expanding to include all the items we can think of," he said.

That is precisely what alarms privacy advocates such as Cedric Laurant, policy counsel for the Washington, D.C.-based Electronic Privacy Information Center.

"It's a very slippery slope into which the authorities may be tempted to go," Laurant said. "You could use that technology to enforce any type of law that requires people to file their taxes."

Privacy advocates fear BootFinder could lend itself to "function creep", in which a technology intended for one purpose evolves into other uses.

Indeed, the president of the company that developed BootFinder, Andy Bucholz of Alexandria, Va.-based G2 Tactics, says he is in talks that he hopes will one day lead to a BootFinder-like system getting access to the National Crime Information Center database.



Outfitted with a laptop computer and the BootFinder, tow truck driver, Jay Juliano drive with overdue taxes.

Major Market Indices

Bucholz said the talks are addressing privacy and security.

Such issues were paramount to a number of states that pulled out of a federally funded database program launched in 2002 called the Multistate Anti-Terrorism Information Exchange — "Matrix" for short — that was compiling billions of pieces of information on potential criminal suspects.

Harsh punishment?

Laurant complained, additionally, that New Haven's towing regimen is disproportionate punishment for relatively small tax bills.

Kathy Martone was doing her dishes one night last week when the city came to get her Plymouth Neon, for which she owed \$85 in taxes.

"I didn't know till I went to walk my dog," Martone said.

Motorists who have had their vehicles seized say they are given little warning and must miss work to get their car back.

New Haven officials say, however, that delinquent taxpayers are given five notices and warnings before their vehicles are seized.

In Bridgeport, Mayor John Fabrizi got a demonstration of BootFinder last week and said that within five minutes he had identified three cars whose owners owed a total of \$900 in taxes.

"I was very impressed," Fabrizi said. "I feel we're going to go with the program."

The city's tax collector, Bob Tetreault, says it is currently owed more than \$20 million in car taxes and its collection rate is below 70 percent, "which is just embarrassing."

The BootFinder remains a work in progress.

O'Leary of Arlington County said it sometimes fails to work when lighting conditions are variable due to cloudy weather. But he predicts big things for the technology.

"I compare it to buying a plane from the Wright brothers 100 years ago," O'Leary said. "It's a very clever device. This thing will fly. Give it a little time."

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