

Call to redesign vehicle plates cites benefit in abduction cases

By John Laidler
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Ten years after Gary P. Richard offered a way to make vehicle registration plates easier to remember, the Danvers resident's plan is gaining new attention on Beacon Hill.

In 2002, prompted by several high-profile cases of child abduction, Richard proposed that symbols such as stars and triangles be included on the plates so that witnesses to crimes could more readily identify vehicles that might be connected to them. Each plate would have a single symbol and up to four numbers or letters.

"Cognitively, when you look at random numbers, even adults can't remember that information," said Richard, a businessman and inventor. But, he said, studies show children as young as 2½ "can look at a symbol and recall it a week later."

After languishing for seven years, legislation proposing Richard's plan has gained some noticeable ground in recent months.

Named "Molly's Bill," after a Warren teenager, Molly Bish, who was abducted and murdered in 2000, the legislation would require the state Registry of Motor Vehicles to implement the new registration plate format within five years.

The bill, whose chief sponsor is Senate minority leader Bruce E. Tarr, a Gloucester Republican, was endorsed recently by associations representing both Massachusetts and New England police chiefs, along with the

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Massachusetts District Attorneys Association, according to Richard, who has established his own nonprofit, EZ-ID (www.ez-id.org), to promote the legislation.

"There's tremendous momentum this year," said Richard, noting that the bill recently garnered support from the Massachusetts Major Cities Chiefs organization, whose president is Everett Police Chief Steven Mazzie.

Tarr said he is also encouraged by the "fresh look" the bill is receiving from the two lawmakers who took over as co-chairmen of the Legislature's Joint Transportation Committee a year ago — Senator Thomas M. McGee, a Lynn Democrat, and state Representative William M. Straus, a Mattapoisett Democrat.

The bill is also timely, Tarr said, since the Registry of Motor Vehicles is undertaking an update of its outdated computer system that would enable it to more easily accommodate the proposed change.

Also helping the bill gain attention has been the involvement of the Molly Bish Center, a program at Anna Maria College in Paxton that works on initiatives to protect children and older people. For the past year, center director Jay Gardiner has partnered with Richard to build support for his proposal.

"This has applications across all of public safety," Gardiner said. "It empowers the whole community, even children, to be able to report and retain information from a license plate."

In addition to running a distribution company, primarily for the semiconductor industry, Richard is an inventor whose creations include a kinetic-energy-



A sample vehicle plate based on Gary P. Richard's proposal.

enhanced drumstick.

It was the Bish case and the 2002 abduction in Utah of Elizabeth Smart that led Richard, who then lived in Gloucester, "to do something about child abduction."

He realized that making registration plates more distinctive could help find fleeing suspects. That led him to the idea of adding symbols to them.

"Police have said that when they track down a vehicle, it's because of some sort of decal, some sort of sticker or graphic that people are able to look at and remember," he said.

In addition to being familiar images, symbols would be recognizable through a rear-view mirror and by people with dyslexia, Richard noted. He said their use would also reduce to four the number of alpha-numeric characters that would generally be needed on a plate, which would itself make it more identifiable.

His bill would not affect low-number and vanity plates, since they are already easily recognizable. Richard predicted the ability to use symbols would actually spur more people to apply for vanity plates, generating new income that he expects would more than cover the costs of switching to the new format.

Tarr calls Richard's effort "a great example of how an individual can conceive of an idea and

bring a very positive thought to bear on state government."

While it has not drawn any clear opposition, "what the bill has working against it is the magnitude of the change," Tarr said. "There's a general apprehension about changing the state license plate system."

In light of that concern, Tarr said, supporters have taken a "no-stone-unturned approach to this," meeting police groups and Registry officials, and even taking a field trip to the state's plate-making facility at MCI-Cedar Junction.

"Safety is MassDOT's number one priority," Michael Versek, a spokesman for the state Department of Transportation, which oversees the Registry, said by e-mail. The Registry "has participated in a series of meetings with supporters of this legislation. As with all legislation that involves the RMV, the RMV studies any potential impacts to business operations and any costs that would be incurred by the Commonwealth," he wrote.

McGee said his committee is reviewing the legislation, and it is premature to say what action it might take.

"We continue to gather information relating to how this might be implemented," McGee said, including how the proposed format would work with the database system being updated by the Registry, and with the national system.

Richard acknowledges that the change he is proposing has never been tried in the United States. But he said it would be fitting for the Commonwealth to lead the way.

"Back in 1903, Massachusetts was the first state in the country to put license plates on motor vehicles," he said.