

Life with Big Brother: Driver's licenses to feature radio chips

State introducing cards that encode personal information

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The state of Washington announced a pilot project to introduce a driver's license "enhanced" with a radio frequency identification, or RFID, chip that would encode personal information and possibly serve as a passport-alternative if approved by the Department of Homeland Security.

Democratic Gov. Christine Gregoire signed a bill March 23 allowing Washington residents to apply for the \$40 voluntary driver's license beginning in January.

Gregoire spokeswoman Kristin Jacobsen told WND in an e-mail the enhanced license is intended to be an alternative way of complying with the [Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative](#) mandated by the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004.

The Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative, the Real ID Act, the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America all call for ID technology to be built into drivers' licenses, passports and other types of border-crossing identification.

Concerns are being expressed within the Department of Homeland Security, however, regarding the wisdom of applying RFID technology to human identification programs.

Under the WHTI, as of Jan. 23 all citizens of the U.S., Canada, and Mexico were required to present a valid passport, or some other federally accepted document, to enter or re-enter the U.S. by air travel.

As early as Jan. 1, 2008, these passport requirements will be extended to all citizens of the U.S., Canada, and Mexico who enter or re-enter the U.S. by land or sea, extending even to ferry travel.

The Department of Homeland Security is in the process of setting requirements regarding acceptable documentation and preparing to implement the passport requirements under the WHTI.

Jacobsen told WND the Washington state enhanced driver's license will require verified proof of citizenship, identity and residence.

"They will look similar to current licenses and ID cards," Jacobsen explained, "but will have an icon on the front that indicates the holder is a U.S. citizen."

The \$40 fee for the RFID license is designed to be less than the cost to apply for a passport

(\$97 on initial application, plus \$67 to renew every 15 years). Regular driver's licenses in Washington state cost \$25 to renew every five years.

"The enhanced driver's license will cost significantly less than a passport, but will carry many of the same features," Jacobsen stressed. "Features will include an embedded technology that will allow for quick and effective identification checks at border crossings."

Naomi Elmer, a spokeswoman for DHS, confirmed to WND that DHS is working with Washington state on the RFID enhanced driver's license pilot test.

Yet, Elmer positioned the Washington initiative under the Real ID, not under the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative.

"Currently we are working with Washington state because they came to us with a proposal to see if they could create an ID that would be acceptable for Real ID," she said.

"Right now, we are now fulfilling the congressional mandate proposing minimum standards for state-issued driver's licenses and ID cards that the federal agencies would accept for official purposes," Elmer said. "These requirements will go into effect after May 11, 2008."

Elmer acknowledged not all state drivers' licenses can be reissued by that date.

"DHS is permitting states to apply for and receive extensions up to Dec. 31, 2009," she said. "For the states that are receiving extensions, their drivers' licenses will need to meet our requirements by Jan. 1, 2010."

Elmer told WND that DHS is working with Washington state on its RFID-enhanced driver's license proposal.

"We are still working out the details with Washington state at this time," Elmer said

DHS has not yet approved Washington state's proposal, she noted.

Within DHS, there is controversy over whether RFID technology should be applied to ID cards.

On Dec. 6, 2006, the Data Privacy & Integrity Advisory Committee [advised DHS against the use of RFID for human identity verification](#). Concerns over invasion of privacy and whether RFID information could be kept secure were primary considerations in the committee's recommendation that DHS proceed cautiously before implementing the program.

Elmer also told WND that Washington state's proposal had nothing to do with the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America.

Under SPP, the "2005 Report to the Leaders" specified the SPP working groups have determined that "trusted travelers of North America" will be issued bio-metric border crossing passes, similar to the electronic measures being issued trucks and other commercial vehicles under the "trusted trader of North America" initiative.

The Real ID Act of 2005 was passed as Division B of the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense, the Global War on Terror, and Tsunami Relief, 2005.

DHS has issued [proposed minimum standards for driver's licenses and identification cards under the Real ID Act](#).

Still, a move to reject the Real ID Act is gaining momentum at the grassroots level, with nearly half the states voting not to participate.

Idaho, Maine and Arkansas have passed state resolutions rejecting participation.

Other states – including Arizona, Georgia, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, Vermont and Wyoming – are considering similar legislation.

Bills rejecting Real ID also have been introduced in Hawaii, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina and West Virginia.

On March 2, the White House announced the requirements of the Real ID Act would be put off until the end of 2009, acknowledging widespread opposition to the measure.

Related article:

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