



Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on August 9, 2013

Lawmakers Avoid Traffic Penalties With Special License Plates

Thanks to loopholes in Colorado and California laws, local officials and their families are avoiding thousands of dollars in parking fines and traffic violation tickets, according to [investigations](#) by a Denver-based CBS affiliate and others. Intended to protect police officers and other public employees from criminals, the Colorado law gives 100 lawmakers and representatives a way to avoid radar tickets for speeding, as well as dodge collection notices on past-due parking tickets.



The loophole emanates from a provision that prevents legislative plates from being entered into the Division of Motor Vehicles database; therefore, if someone sporting one of the special license plates is caught blazing through a red-light camera, there are no state records to cross-reference the plate to the driver's home address.

An added benefit for those awarded the special plates is their ability to evade parking penalties. "Because the Department of Public Works relies on the DMV database to contact people with unpaid parking tickets we are not able to contact legislators with unpaid parking tickets," [asserted](#) Denver Public Works spokeswoman Emily Williams.

Williams acknowledged that lawmakers can avoid parking tickets without consequences. "That's true," she stated, "And it's the glitch in the system."

The CBS investigation identified [16 legislative plates](#) that have racked up more than \$2,000 in fines and penalties that have not yet been paid. Williams says the glitch has been recognized, but the cost to track down the lawmakers is too great and perhaps too difficult to administer.

One state lawmaker has affirmed his intention to seal up the loophole in the next session, by simply abolishing the special plates altogether. "It's absolutely unfair," state representative Chris Holbert [contended](#), adding that the plates amount to little more than decorations. "We should be held accountable like any other citizen. We are elected to represent the people and there's no reason for us to be treated differently."

The debacle only surfaced after Evonne Estis [began receiving tickets](#) for indiscretions that she realized weren't hers. As it turned out, Estis had a vanity plate on her SUV that read "33," which is state Sen. Mike Johnston's district number and is noted on his legislative license plate. As a result, three separate traffic tickets were sent to Estis' address.

The issue is even more widespread in California, which allows motorists with 1,800 state and local departments to black out their addresses under a state program. Some observers note that California's [Confidential Records Program](#), which was established some three decades ago, has been broadened to cover hundreds of thousands of public employees, including museum guards. "The authorities? They don't even know who's on the list," says Chad Dornsife, who heads the Best Highway Safety Practices



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Institute.

Similar to the Colorado loophole, perks that come with the special license plates include zipping through red-light cameras, ignoring parking tickets, and buzzing through the state's 91 toll lanes. California first initiated the program in 1978; it was implemented as a safety measure for police officers. But, as Fox News notes, over the years it has expanded:

California first started withholding police officers' addresses and information as a safety measure in 1978. By 1985, state lawmakers had expanded the program to include judges, prosecutors and themselves. Twenty-eight years later, the list has ballooned to include city council members, prison guards, investigators and National Park Service rangers.

According to a [2008 investigation](#) by the *Orange County Register*, some of California's top violators included an Orange County social worker and a parole agent with the Department of Corrections. Of course, one of the heaviest hitters was an airport traffic employee, who was pulled over in his Toyota Camry, and tagged with a startling \$35,000 in unpaid violations. Evidently the Camry was flagged by a California Highway Patrol officer after breezing through the express toll lane for free — for what ended up being the offender's 470th time doing it.

The *Register* inspected computer logs for the 91 express lanes and discovered 14,535 unpaid trips by drivers with confidential plates in the past five years. The violations comprised 3,722 separate vehicles, with some of the drivers bypassing the paid toll lanes hundreds of times.

"That's only about \$29,500 in tolls, but under the penalty schedule set by state law, fines for chronic violators can reach \$500 per toll, which would total more than \$5 million for the confidential plate holders with multiple violations if they ignored warning notices," the newspaper noted. "OCTA [Orange County Transportation Authority] officials said that if they had been able to notify these people, they believe most would have paid before penalties ballooned."

Unfortunately, though, the law doesn't allow it. And nixing the plates altogether will be a difficult task when those charged with altering the law are the very ones benefiting from it.



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