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Senate Bill 211
Motor Vehicle Dealer Plates
Senate Committee on Transportation & Elections
October 13, 2011

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 211 (SB 211), relating to registration plates for motor vehicle dealers, distributors, manufacturers and transporters.

Senator Olsen and I introduced this legislation at the request of the Wisconsin Automobile and Truck Dealers Association to address a problem with the newly redesigned motor vehicle dealer license plates.

The Department of Transportation (DOT) provides each licensed dealer with their own unique "dealer number" (e.g. 125). That number is used by the Department to identify a specific dealer for all licensing activities. Every plate issued to a dealer is stamped with the dealer's number. Until recently, each plate was also stamped with a distinguishing symbol, which was a simple alphabetic character immediately following the dealer's number (e.g. 125 A, 125 B, 125 C, etc.).

In August, the DOT began issuing newly designed motor vehicle dealer license plates. The new plates, however, do not include a stamped distinguishing symbol. Despite the plate changes, a distinguishing symbol is still required under s. 341.52.

The distinguishing symbol is important to the dealer's unique plate because it helps them keep track of their license plates. Dealers are issued multiple plates to enable them to conduct business, facilitate test drives, and provide loaner vehicles. In 1989, the Legislature recognized the confusion and security risks associated with multiple license plates all containing the same number, which resulted in the enactment of s. 341.52.

The symbol helps dealers keep a day-to-day visual check on their plates. They can inventory plate letters and track which sales people have customers in cars. They can track down misuse and questionable driving habits by seeing the plate's letter and know who is responsible for that plate. It helps them track down customers (or employees) who incur parking tickets and/or run toll booths. The letter also helps law enforcement identify stolen vehicles.

The elimination of the stamped letter is due to DOT implementing a Registration and Titling System (more commonly known as RATS) computer conversion. In the past, dealer plate numbers and corresponding letters were manually recorded. Under the new RATS program, dealer plate number assignments will be kept in the computerized database and information about the plate will be accessible to law enforcement in the field.

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However, when programming the RATS system, the Department did not account for the corresponding plate letter. The DMV has indicated that reprogramming RATS at this juncture would be costly and shut down the system for months. RATS integrates the procurement and production of all license plates.

SB 211 is a simple amendment to section 341.52, which would allow dealers to purchase alphabetic stickers, approved by the Department, to be attached to the dealer plate. The Department currently utilizes various alphabetic stickers that measure approximately 1 ¾ inches by 1 ¾ inches constructed of easily readable reflective material. In addition, under this legislation, the distinguishing symbol is no longer mandatory.

DOT has reviewed SB 211 and did not express concern with the legislation.