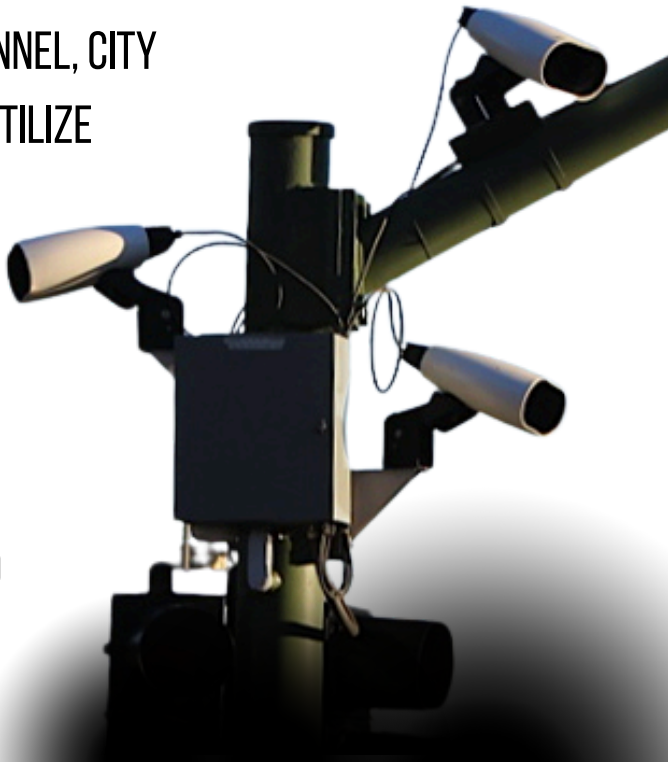
DATA RETENTION AND ALPRS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CITIES

By Lily Lieberman, Fall 2026

Overview

On February 10th, 2026, California Senator Sabrina Cervantes introduced SB 1013, which proposed new rules for operators of "Automated License Plate Readers," or ALPRs. The proposed requirements address how public agencies, including local ones, must take steps to ensure the protection of data gathered by the camera system. Notably, the bill would have required that **agencies operating ALPRs archive data held for more than 60 days** after fourteen days (SB 1013, 2026, Section 8). Because many Southern California cities currently hold contracts with ALPR operators and have retention periods of various lengths, this bill would have been highly consequential to local/city policy, **had it not died in September** (CalMatters, 2026).

SB 1013 HAD THE POTENTIAL TO CHANGE STANDARD PROCEDURE FOR HOW LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES, OVERSIGHT PERSONNEL, CITY ATTORNEYS, I.T. STAFF, AND OTHERS ARE ALLOWED TO UTILIZE ALPR TECHNOLOGY AND RECORDS. **THE FOLLOWING HISTORY IS INTENDED TO ASSIST LOCAL OFFICIALS IN CONTEXTUALIZING THE DEVELOPMENT OF SB 1013, WITH RECOGNITION THAT IT WILL MOST LIKELY NOT BE THE FINAL ATTEMPT BY CALIFORNIA LAWMAKERS TO FURTHER CODIFY REGULATIONS BASED ON PRIOR POLICIES AND GROWING PUBLIC INTEREST.**



ALPR, photo credit: Mike Katz-Lacabe

Policy History

ALPRs are “high-speed camera systems that photograph license plates, convert the numbers and letters into machine-readable text, tag them with the time and location, and upload that data into a database for retrieval” (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2016). **They automatically collect large amounts of data on all drivers** who pass within their range, even those who are not the subject of an investigation or criminal proceeding.

Fast Changes and Slow Responses

The earliest California legislation that set restrictions on ALPR data usage was adopted as part of the 2011-2012 budget package, signed into law on June 30, 2011 (Committee on Budget and Fiscal Review, 2011). Section 2720 set limits on how long data may be retained by California Highway Patrol cameras, laying legal groundwork for regulating such retention periods, but **imposing limits only on CHP, not on all operators** (Senate Budget and Fiscal Review, 2011, Section: Transportation, p. 6). Subsequent legislation, namely SB 1330 in 2011, failed to pass broader restrictions for state’s and local agencies’ use of ALPRs (Assembly Committee on Transportation, 2015, p. 3). A January 2015 report by the ACLU noted that, “… basic transparency, oversight, and accountability has become the exception, not the rule. Many California communities lack the guidance to make smart decisions about surveillance and are moving forward without public conversation, careful consideration of the costs and benefits, **or adequate policies in place to prevent misuse and safeguard rights**” (ACLU NorCal, 2015, p. 1).



Interactive, volunteer-based map of LA/OC ALPRs (~8,000), courtesy of FindingFlock.com.

THE BROAD ADOPTION OF THE TECHNOLOGY HAD, THUS FAR, OUTPACED ANY STATE OR LOCAL POLICY FRAMEWORK, **LEADING TO A DIVERSITY OF USE CASES AMONG OPERATORS AND CONTRACTORS.**

ALPR, photo credit: Mike Katz-Lacabe



It wasn't until 2015, and the passage of SB 34, that **data compiled by ALPRs was reclassified as a form of personal information** and became subject to usage and privacy laws. SB 34 is considered the foundational ALPR regulatory policy in California, and codified privacy policies, data security, and restrictions on how operators could use or share the information collected by the cameras (LegInfo, 2015) —

DESPITE THIS, IT DOES NOT LIMIT DATA RETENTION TO A SET NUMBER OF DAYS.



Mobile ALPR operated by US Border Patrol (CalMatters, 2026)

Key to understanding policy precursors to SB 1013 are **California's restrictions on cooperation between law enforcement and federal immigration authorities** — not directly related to data retention, but important for viewing the proposals in SB 1013 through the lens of responsible, legal data usage. SB 54, which passed in 2017, prevents state and local agencies from assisting in federal immigration activities (LegiScan, 2017). Critics of companies like Flock Safety, an ALPR provider that holds multi-year contracts with many California cities (FindingFlock.com, 2026), have cited concerns that boundaries between local surveillance and federal immigration enforcement are thin (ACLU, 2025), as evidenced by reporting that...

"OVER 80 LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES, FROM OVER A DOZEN STATES, HAVE AGREED TO SHARE LICENSE PLATE LOCATION INFORMATION WITH ICE. **EMAILS SHOW LOCAL POLICE HANDING DRIVER INFORMATION OVER TO ICE INFORMALLY, VIOLATING LOCAL LAW AND ICE POLICIES**" (ACLU, 2019).

California has heavily restricted cooperation between cities and federal immigration enforcers, but the issue remains contentious, particularly in affluent communities. During a period of time wherein "The number of deportations within the United States increased by a factor of five over the course of the first year of the second Trump administration," (Blair and Hausman, 2026) any holistic history of ALPR legislation must also include the limits set by extant rules surrounding federal immigration collaboration.

Conclusion and Anticipated Future Actions

THE ISSUE OF ALPR DATA RETENTION, WHICH MAY HAVE ORIGINATED WITH A NARROW FOCUS ON RETENTION AND PRIVACY, **IS NOW UNDENIABLY TIED WITH MORE COMPLEX SOCIAL PROBLEMS**, SUCH AS IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT, FAMILY VIOLENCE, CIVIL RIGHTS, STALKING, AND MORE.

Any action to regulate data retention will inevitably be viewed as a confirmation or a rejection of how operators behave currently — arguably, **it will be a referendum on how operators, law enforcement agencies in particular, have self-governed**. If SB 1013 had become law, Southern California cities would have been subject to new regulations that, in most cases, change retention and archiving requirements. In Newport Beach, for example, data is currently retained for 365 days after recording (Newport Beach City Council Staff Report, 2025), while in Fullerton, data may only be kept for thirty days, with an additional seven for backup before deletion (Agenda Report, Fullerton City Council, 2026) — a policy which will presumably resume when the city's six-month "pause" of its cameras ends (LA Times, October 2026). When the next attempt to regulate is made, the possibility of dramatically altered requirements will recur.



Santa Ana Councilwoman Jessie Lopez speaks at a news conference against Flock cameras outside of city hall on Sept. 9, 2026. Credit: Hosam Elattar, Voice of OC

PUBLIC OPINION AROUND THE USE OF ALPR DATA IS SPLIT, AND LAWMAKERS IN CALIFORNIA ARE UNDER PRESSURE TO MAKE DECISIVE CHOICES ACROSS A CHECKERED LANDSCAPE OF FLOCK CONTRACTS, STATE AND FEDERAL LAW, AND CITY-LEVEL DEBATES. CITY COUNCIL MEMBERS, STAFF, AND POLICYMAKERS WHO OCCUPY THE LOCAL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT WILL FIND THAT **THE FUTURE OF ALPR DATA RETENTION LEGISLATION IS DIRECTLY RELEVANT TO THE MANAGEMENT OF THEIR CITY.**