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# Here's what those cameras see when you drive through those new toll gantries on the Mass. Pike

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By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE STAFF DECEMBER 12, 2016

Driving down the Massachusetts Turnpike nowadays is like a stroll down the red carpet.

Flashes are constantly firing on those new all-electronic toll collection gantries as cameras mounted

on the metal frames snap photos of the front and back —and record a brief video — of each vehicle that passes underneath.

The data are needed to ensure drivers are billed accurately, state transportation officials say.

But privacy advocates have voiced concern about the photos and videos the new system captures — as well as other potentially sensitive data it collects, such as cars' speed. There have also been worries about the state's policy of keeping the records for months, if not years.



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State [law](#) protects tolling data somewhat. Customer tolling records are not considered a matter of public record, for instance, making them off limits to the traditional methods journalists (or anyone in the public) can use to obtain government records.

But they can be obtained via subpoena. And the Massachusetts Department of Transportation has said it will share real-time information with law enforcement without a subpoena if it's requested in [certain emergency situations](#).

Drivers can also request copies of their own records.

A Globe reporter did just that, and received the following video clip and images.

(The Globe used software to blur out the license plate and

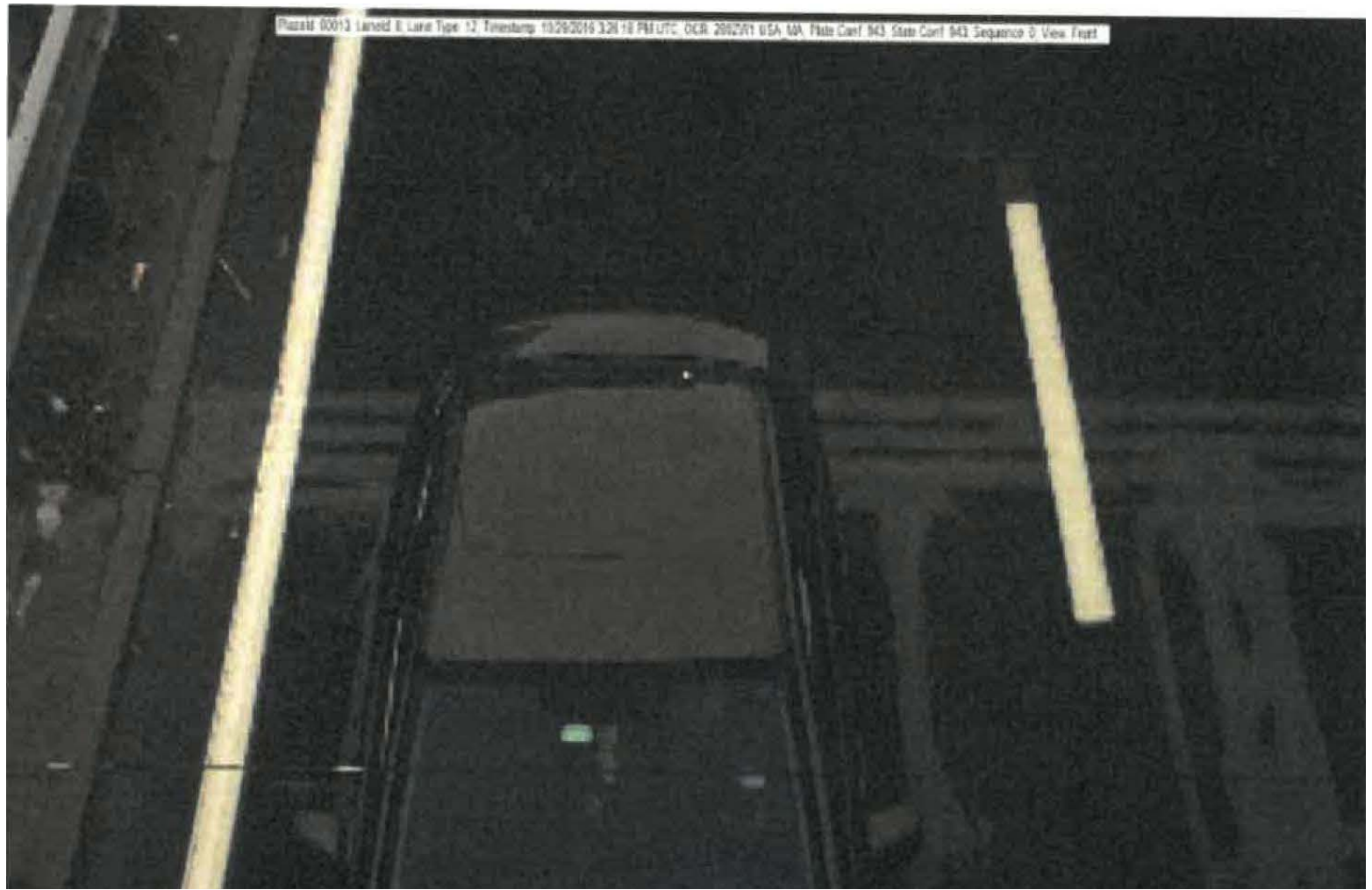
also to slow the speed of the second video clip shown below.)



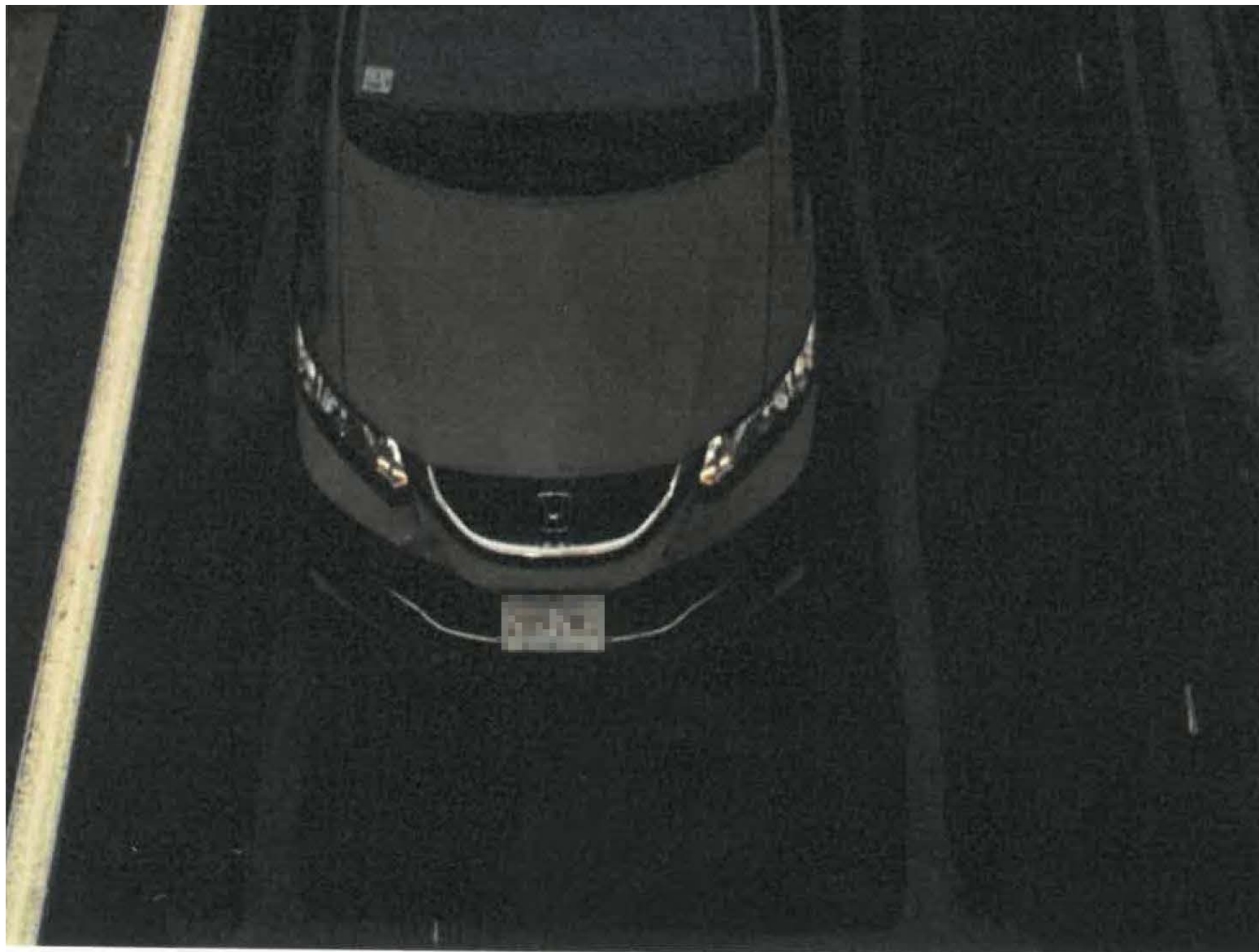
TZ15E LP2 2016-10-08 12:13:54.93



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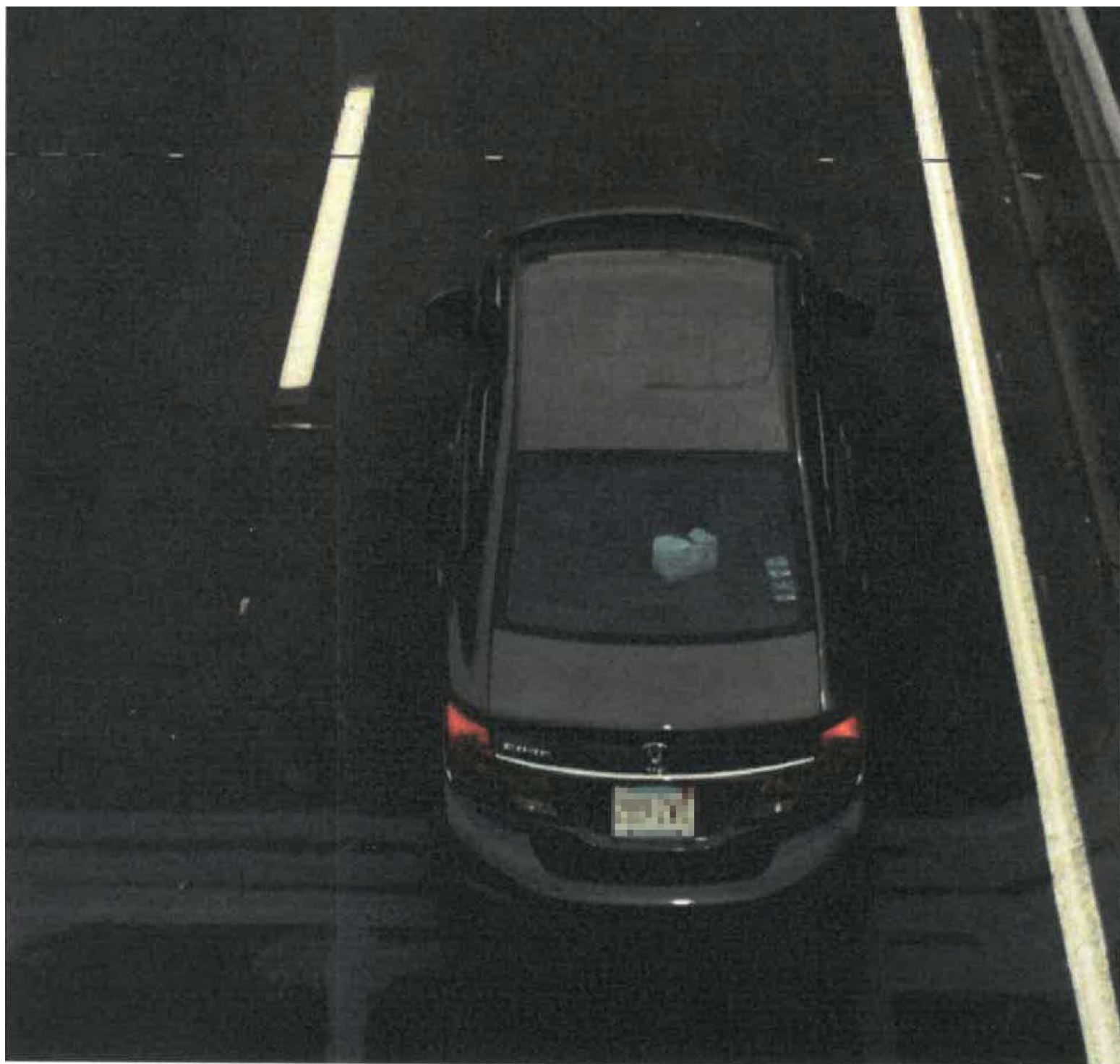


Plaza# 00013 Lane# 0 Lane Type: 12 Timestamp: 10/26/2016 3:28:18 PM UTC OCR: 200ZRY USA MA Plate Conf: 943 State Conf: 943 Sequence: 0 View: Front



**This image shows the front exterior of the vehicle. You can make out a tree-shaped air freshener inside the car, but not much else of the interior.**





**This image shows the rear exterior of the vehicle. Here you can make out a tissue box next to the rear windshield, but not much else of the interior.**

The images sent to the Globe do not show much of the inside of the car — save for a tissue box near the back windshield and one of those tree-shaped air fresheners hanging on the front mirror.

The video, if paused in the right spot and studied carefully, shows what looks like a passenger looking at a cellphone in the front, and another passenger doing the same in the back, but neither the people nor what they are doing is identifiable.

The system uses high-resolution cameras, according to the agreement MassDOT reached in 2014 with Raytheon Co. to have the company install the gantries.

State officials said the cameras do not capture clear footage of the inside of vehicles.

“The video images captured are for the sole purpose of collecting tolls,” MassDOT’s lawyer, Eileen M. Fenton, said in an e-mail. “We do not use the images to view the occupants or other objects in a vehicle. The images may show a grainy outline of the occupants, color of clothing, and the like, but the images do not show detailed facial features or other identifying characteristics.”

Kade Crockford, director of the Technology for Liberty Project at the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, said she was pleased to hear officials say that the images do not show faces or other identifying characteristics.

“A core information security and privacy principle is to only collect information needed for the business purpose for which it is collected,” she said. “MassDOT doesn’t need to know what you look like in order to process your tolls, so it’s appropriate not to collect that information.”

But Crockford said she remained concerned about the length of time the transportation department is storing images, videos, and other potentially sensitive toll-related data.

The still images are needed to capture vehicle license plate numbers in order to bill owners of vehicles not equipped with transponders, and to ensure that vehicles with transponders are billed properly, state officials have said. Under a [newly](#) adopted [policy](#), MassDOT stores the image files for seven years if they were used for billing, or for three months if they were not used for billing.

The video clip captures the number of axles on each vehicle (toll rates are higher for vehicles with more than two axles). The state’s policy is to keep the videos for up to 180 days.

“A shorter retention period would both fulfill tolling business requirements and guard against threats from abusive insiders and malicious outsiders who could hack the database,” said Crockford.

Other records the Globe obtained show how the system identifies and records the lane the vehicle was traveling in, and its speed.

For example, at 11:26 a.m. on Oct. 29, when the reporter's vehicle passed east under the toll gantry in Allston, one type of sensor on the gantry clocked it going at 55 miles per hour, while a second type of sensor determined the vehicle was going 58 miles per hour.

Officials have said vehicle [speed data](#) are used to synchronize the cameras that record each license plate. Officials have pledged that [speed data will not be used to ticket drivers](#).

MassDOT officials have said that, in recent years, the department has received about a dozen subpoenas annually, on average, for toll transaction data, including subpoenas from federal officials, law enforcement agencies, and lawyers representing individuals in divorce and other civil cases.

The department said it notifies people whose information is sought through subpoenas, allowing them to take legal action to fight the subpoenas.

Testing of the new tolling system began in June and it was switched on for toll collection in late October.

Work to tear down old tollbooths is [ahead of schedule](#), and the new tolling system has [already cut down on travel times](#) for commuters, according to state officials, who have said they expect it will also curb pollution and accidents at toll plazas.

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