

Florida has spent \$1.5 million developing smartphone ID apps that hardly anyone is using

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Are we ever going to be able to leave our driver's licenses at home and use a smartphone app if pulled over by police?

It's an enticing idea—one that has been under discussion by Florida lawmakers since 2014, just a few years after Apple and its competitors introduced smartphones.

But apparently the future is not yet here. Although apps allowing wireless transmission and capture of digital driver's license data have been available for download from Apple and Android stores since November 2021, few police agencies or businesses in Florida have adopted the technology.

Because Florida law still requires drivers to carry the physical plastic versions of their driver's licenses, some users who have downloaded the app complain that it's of little use.

Since 2020, Thales Defense & Security, a Maryland-based subsidiary of French technology contractor Thales Group, has been working with the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (FHSMV) to develop a platform called Florida Smart ID for use by motorists and police in traffic stops, by customs officials at border security checkpoints, and by businesses, such as liquor stores and groceries, that require proof of age to purchase alcohol and other restricted products.

Thales has been paid about \$1.5 million of a \$1.8 million contract and is currently working on phase two of the project—expansion of the app for storage of vehicle registrations and proof of insurance.

The way it works is supposed to be simple: A user downloads the app, creates an account and gets their license validated by connecting to the FHSMV. If used during a traffic stop, the driver and officer will authorize data sharing through a wireless "digital handshake." The user's phone will generate a QR code that will enable the officer to obtain the user's license information from a department server.

Sharing information with businesses works in a similar way, but users can opt out of sharing data not relevant to the transaction. For example, to get into a bar, a user can choose not to share data fields revealing their address, weight, height, or gender.

At Apple and Android app stores, Florida Smart ID apps are available for drivers, businesses and law enforcement agencies.

According to the FHSMV, there were 17.9 million licensed drivers in the state as of February.

Through March 9, the driver's license app had been downloaded 142,803 times from the Apple and Android stores. Businesses downloaded the proof-of-age verifier app from the two platforms 11,828 times, and law enforcement agencies downloaded the app they need to wirelessly receive driver license data 3,795 times.

Of the 154,631 downloads, more than 95,000 apps have been activated, according to the department.

But the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles doesn't know who is actually using the app, spokeswoman Molly Best said. "We cannot determine which law enforcement agencies or businesses are using the app (that information is not collected in the app stores)," she said by email.

Thales Defense & Security did not respond to an email Friday asking how many businesses and police agencies are using the platform.

Users report difficulties

Each of the three apps are rated two of five stars by Apple store users. Several users complained that it doesn't work with Apple Wallet. Others

said they had difficulty activating the app or getting it to scan their physical driver's license. Some had trouble taking the required selfie.

One commenter reported in January showing to bouncers at clubs and bars, "and they have no idea it exists." The same user reported showing it to law enforcement agencies "at all levels," including city police, sheriff's departments, the Florida Highway Patrol and the federal Transportation Security Administration "and none know what it is, let alone have QR scanners to read the apps' QR code verification function."

The complaint was followed by one identified as "Developer Response" pointing out that "Acceptance by businesses is still limited as the (apps) continue to be tested, but we are looking forward to expanding acceptance soon."

Another user apparently lives in an area where local police have adopted the technology, though the area was not identified. "I've been stopped many times by cops and would hand them my phone with Smart ID," the user said.

Best attributed some users' difficulties to a misunderstanding of how the system works. "It's a two-part system," she said by phone. "You have to download it, and there has to be someone using the verification app for it to be effective."

Through the end of 2022, the department has conducted 29 presentations and/or demonstrations of the technology to businesses, law enforcement agencies, state agencies, industry associations, safety coalitions and the [general public](#), Best said, adding, "We are currently working to identify more audiences for 2023 outreach efforts."

Asked for a list of the 29 attendees, Best cited six: the Florida Highway

Patrol, the Florida Police Chiefs Association, the Alcoholic Beverages and Tobacco Division of the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation, Walgreens, AAA and RaceTrac.

The South Florida Sun Sentinel reached out to local law enforcement agencies and a few large retail businesses that sell alcohol and asked if they are using the platform.

Police agencies holding off on adoption

The Fort Lauderdale Police Department, Coral Springs Police Department and Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office responded and said they are not using it.

"FLPD is aware of this new program but we do not currently use it," said Ali Adamson, public information officer for the Fort Lauderdale Police Department. "We will continue to monitor the updates and future use of the program is possible."

Coral Springs Police Capt. Gerald Irwin said, "A member of our Traffic Unit has attended a demonstration that the FHSMV conducted. There are no immediate plans to adopt the system. We currently do not provide officers with the devices needed to install the app."

Irwin said the department would consider looking into the program in the future.

The Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office isn't using the program, either, spokeswoman Therese Barbera said by email. Whether the agency might adopt it in the future is "unknown at this time," she said, "as it is a requirement by law to show your driver license. If the law changes, then we may adopt the system."

Similarly, Publix is "aware of the Florida Smart ID program" but has not attended demonstrations, media relations manager Lindsey Willis said. "We continue to evaluate the technology for future consideration."

Several other businesses and [law enforcement agencies](#), including Broward Sheriff's Office and Miami-Dade Police Department, did not respond to inquiries in time for this report.

In addition to the requirement that users still carry their plastic driver's license, another possible barrier to wider adoption is the need for verification apps to be housed on smartphones, said Mark Rasch, an attorney specializing in cybersecurity and data privacy for the Ohio-based law firm Kohrman Jackson Krantz.

"Whose cell phone at 7-Eleven do I pull out to [verify an age]?" Rasch said in an interview. "My personal phone or the store's phone? It's probably my personal cell phone but the app has to be validated as registered to the store."

That could raise privacy concerns for employees who have to install the app, he said.

Similarly, police would have to install the apps on their personal phones, or their departments would have to purchase separate phones for them. According to Best of the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, the Florida Highway Patrol is currently distributing phones to troopers across the state in preparation for the agency's use of the license verifier.

Competing standards a problem

Another impediment is the absence of standard technology enabling use of the apps across state lines, Rasch said. Various states are developing

apps that communicate in different ways.

For example, Arizona, Colorado and Maryland have apps that store digital licenses in iPhone's Apple Wallet. Others use technology developed by Mobile ID. Still others created their own apps.

The absence of a single standard renders the technology less useful for frequent travelers or in states, such as Florida, that get a lot of visitors.

A pilot program by the federal Transportation Security Administration allowing travelers to present a digital ID to move through airport security checkpoints requires users to have their IDs uploaded to their Apple Wallets. Florida, with no Apple Wallet tie, does not participate, even though Miami International Airport is one of 13 airports selected for the pilot.

Besides, the TSA wants travelers to have their driver's licenses with them anyway, travel website The Points Guy reported.

States will likely have to agree on a national standard, such as the Real ID standard adopted by the federal government in 2005 for physical driver licenses, before motorists will be allowed to leave their plastic cards at home, Rasch said.

"Law enforcement agencies need to be able to read driver licenses of everybody," he said.

Best said the FHSMV has been talking with other states that have or are developing mobile driver's licenses "to encourage nationwide adoption."

But she said, "There's always going to be a requirement to have your [physical] driver license with you."

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