

Vermont Petroleum Association
A division of the Vermont Retail and Grocers Association

Testimony of Joseph L. Choquette III
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House Transportation Committee
March 23, 2017

Good afternoon Chairman Brennan and members of the House Transportation Committee. My name is Joe Choquette. I am a lobbyist with Downs Rachlin Martin PLLC appearing on behalf of the Vermont Petroleum Association.

The VPA is a group comprised of approximately 80 motor fuel distributors who operate in the state of Vermont and either own or supply as many as 600 refueling stations under all of the recognized brand names, as well as independent brands. I have represented the association since 1986 and we have appeared before the committee many times to discuss issues related to motor fuel marketing, taxation, safety and environment -- such as the management of automatic fire suppression systems and underground petroleum storage tanks.

The VPA is opposed to the provision in this bill that would do away with the requirement for vehicle owners to display front and rear license plates.

Gasoline stations and convenience stores are among the most accessible retail facilities in the state. These stores are open for at least 18 hours every day and operated by a broad cross section of employees ranging from part time high school-aged students to sole proprietors to seniors. With their easy access to the motoring public, these facilities are highly vulnerable to anybody with the intent to commit a robbery, and these stores are a frequent target. The safety of our employees, our customers and our facilities are critical ongoing concerns.

Motor vehicles are used in 70 percent of all serious crimes throughout the United States, according to a study by the National Association of Chiefs of Police. Nearly all of the crimes committed at gasoline stations and convenience stores involve the use of a motor vehicle. Quick identification of these vehicles can help lead to the arrest of the person who committed the crime.

In addition to robbery, gasoline stations are subject to drive-offs by persons seeking a tank of gas without paying and to skimming, which is the practice of installing stealth equipment that will steal a customer's credit card information and personal identification number with the intent of stealing from their credit accounts.

To reduce drive-offs many stations require payment in advance; but there are ways to get around that, and a practiced crook can figure out how to beat the system. Identifying these serial criminals who steal from our members is an important deterrent.

To reduce vulnerability to these types of crimes most stations have made significant investments in equipment aimed at preventing and solving crimes. This includes security cameras trained on the pump islands, cash registers and other areas of the property where crooks might park to avoid detection. The cameras must have a high enough resolution so as to read a license plate. If the cameras capture a license plate image from a vehicle involved in illegal

activity, the film becomes a critical piece of evidence in both the investigation and prosecution of a crime. Front plates are critical, as this is most common approach to our businesses.

During winter in Vermont it is very common for the rear plate on a vehicle to be obscured due to ice and snow, and due to the position of the rear plate above a bumper. In contrast, the front plate is often more clearly visible; so the chance of capturing a clear image of the plate on the front of a vehicle is much greater. It is also much more difficult for a prospective criminal to obscure both images to avoid detection. Vehicles drive into our businesses front-first when coming from the road and do the same when the parking in front of the store before coming inside.

Attached to my testimony is a copy of a story of a recent robbery in Stowe where the availability of a license plate image captured by a gasoline station security camera led to apprehension of the robber. There are many examples of these types of instances, and the availability of a front plate image is critical to detection.

In conclusion, I encourage you to insist that Vermont vehicles continue to display front and rear license plates to help protect our vulnerable operators and prevent crime, and to help the industry and law enforcement to solve crimes when they occur.

Thank you for listening, and I would be pleased to answer any questions.

http://www.stowetoday.com/stowe_reporter/news/local_news/man-charged-in-stowe-armed-robbery/article_ead0f586-f116-11e6-972f-7fc2d4d545d4.html

Man charged in Stowe armed robbery

By the Stowe Reporter Feb 12, 2017



Stowe Reporter

Police arrested a man in Milton roughly 12 hours after he allegedly robbed a woman at gunpoint Saturday night in the parking lot of a Stowe restaurant.

Andrew Stewart Jr., 27, pleaded not guilty Monday in Lamoille County Superior Court to a felony charge of assault and robbery with a weapon. He has no permanent address in Milton, police said, adding he was from the state of Georgia.

The robbery occurred in the parking lot of Sushi Yoshi at 1128 Mountain Road. Police said a woman was standing by her car at 6:49 p.m. when a man walked up to her, held a handgun to her head and told her to give him her money. She handed him her purse and he ran off.

As a police K-9 unit tried to track down the man, Stowe police discovered that a number of purchases had already been made with the victim's credit cards.

The first charge was made an hour after the robbery, at the Sunoco gas station right off the Interstate 89 exit ramp in Williston, a \$101.12 transaction for a carton of American Spirit cigarettes. That's the same brand as the cigarette butt found near the victim's car.

Stowe police drove to the gas station and watched surveillance video, and were able to make out the license plate on the car the man was in.

The car was registered to a Milton woman. At about 1:45 a.m., the Stowe investigator met with Milton police, who had video of that same car in a traffic stop last Friday. They determined the man from the Sunoco was in the passenger seat.

Police checked out the woman's house, where she lives with her parents, and at 6:43 a.m. called the home's owner, who allowed police into the house. Stewart was sleeping upstairs.

The daughter told police she and Stewart had gone to Stowe for dinner Saturday, and Stewart got out of the car to see how long the wait was for a table at Sushi Yoshi. She told police he then came running back, threw his coat in the back seat and told her to leave.

She told police she drove to the Sunoco, where he bought a carton of cigarettes, and then to Hannaford and Best Buy, where he bought some things for her kids.

Stewart told police he didn't remember anything past noon on Saturday because he was so drunk.

The woman permitted police to search her bedroom and car. Police found a loaded gun in a jacket pocket, with an extra magazine in the other pocket. Also in the bedroom, police found the stolen purse under the bed, with the stolen credit cards. Police found numerous receipts with the victim's credit card number on them, from Staples and from Best Buy.

In addition to the purchased items, police found numerous items of clothing with the tags on them. The woman admitted stealing those clothes from AJ's Ski and Sports in Stowe on Saturday.

Stowe police were initially assisted by Morristown police, the Lamoille County Sheriff's Department, Vermont State Police and a state police dog. Later, Stowe police got assistance from police in Milton and South Burlington.

Police said the investigation is continuing and additional charges may be filed.

This story was last updated Feb. 13 at 6 p.m.

