



Kate Harrison  
Councilmember, District 4

CONSENT CALENDAR

June 6, 2023

To: Honorable Members of the City Council

From: Councilmember Harrison, Councilmember Hahn

Subject: Refer \$7,000 to the June 2023 Budget Process to Purchase Marking Equipment to Engrave Identification Numbers onto Catalytic Converters

RECOMMENDATION

Referral to the June 2023 Budget Process for \$7,000 to purchase marking equipment to engrave identification numbers onto catalytic converters to deter theft and assist with investigations and recovery efforts.

BACKGROUND

Catalytic converters are standard technology that help reduce toxic pollution from gasoline and hybrid vehicles. Catalytic converters are made from precious metals, making them targets of theft. Repair and replacement can cost owners thousands of dollars.

Nationally and locally, communities are experiencing unprecedented rates of vehicle-related crime. In Berkeley, catalytic converter theft rose 5,500% between 2017 and 2022.<sup>1</sup> Concerningly, there have been a few instances in the last year where attempted vehicle theft has turned violent and Berkeley residents have had guns pulled on and fired at them. To get at the root of the issue, it is critical to address statewide and national crime syndicates. Investigatory tools such as etching machines are critical.

One of the reasons catalytic converters are targets of theft is because most are not serialized, making it hard to trace and recover stolen converters. To address this issue, many California cities have developed public programs to offer free etching and engraving services to any resident who wants to serialize their catalytic converter. Providing a public program prevents crime by making converters identifiable and traceable, deterring theft, and providing law enforcement more tools for finding stolen catalytic converters. While etching will not ultimately eliminate property theft, it has been shown to decrease it. The California Bureau of Automotive Repair encourages etching identification numbers onto catalytic converters, considering it one of the four top

---

<sup>1</sup> Raguso, Emilie. "Armed Catalytic Converter Thieves Confront Berkeley Man." The Berkeley Scanner, April 27, 2023. <https://www.berkeleyscanner.com/2023/04/27/crime/berkeley-catalytic-converter-thieves-guns-dog-walk/>.

methods of theft prevention: "Engraving or etching your catalytic converter with your vehicle identification number (VIN) or license plate number may deter theft. It may also alert a reputable scrap dealer that the device is stolen and can help to identify the owner."<sup>2</sup> With local, state, and federal intervention, we can help protect our community from impactful, violating, and sometimes violent theft.

Los Altos, California is one of the many cities that has a free, public engraving program through the police department that assists residents in preventing car theft. Their program also partners with local autobody shops. San Jose, California is another city that has developed and implemented a catalytic converter etching program. San Jose Police Foundation President Rob Fisher states, "This program is a great example of a public-private partnership that will make a difference in the lives of San José residents."<sup>3</sup> The San Jose Police Department owns an engraving machine that rotates between different local autobody shops, so that customers can easily request free etching while their car is already getting serviced.

#### FISCAL IMPACTS OF RECOMMENDATION

\$7,000 in General Funds for the purchase of marking equipment to engrave identification numbers onto catalytic converters to deter theft and assist with investigations and recovery efforts.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Cars without catalytic converters emit toxic gas into the atmosphere and the mining associated with and manufacture of replacing converters contributes to greenhouse gas emissions.

#### CONTACT PERSON

Councilmember Kate Harrison, (510) 981-7140

---

<sup>2</sup> California, State of. "Catalytic Converter Theft and the Smog Check Program." Bureau of Automotive Repair, March 8, 2023. <https://www.bar.ca.gov/consumer/smog-check-program/catalytic-converter-theft#:~:text=Mark%20your%20catalytic%20converter%20%E2%80%93%20Engraving,help%20to%20identify%20the%20owner.>

<sup>3</sup> "San Jose Police Unveil Catalytic Converter Etching Program to Help Deter Widespread Theft." CBS News, February 14, 2022. <https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/san-jose-police-unveil-catalytic-converter-etching-program-to-help-deter-widespread-theft/>.