Gemalto will create app for digital driver's licenses, raising ID security questions

Julia Porterfield

November 29, 2016

An internet security company has secured a federal grant to create digital driver's licenses that users would access and update in a smartphone app.

Gemalto has won a grant from the Commerce Department to develop the app — a project that raises questions about the security of a digital ID card and its functionality.

Over the next few years, the international digital security firm will use its office in Austin, Texas, to work with the departments of transportation and motor vehicles in Idaho, Colorado, Maryland and the District of Columbia to test-drive the program.

"Each jurisdiction truly is unique, which brings tremendous strength through a cross-state collaborative effort," said Philippe Benitez, a spokesman for Gemalto, which is based in Amsterdam. "By partnering with four different jurisdictions in various parts of the country, with distinctly different laws, protocols and demographics, we are streamlining the process."

The program would offer a virtual duplicate of a traditional plastic driver's license. Plans call for allowing users to change their addresses, update their organ donor status and renew their licenses — all with the tap of a button.

"The Division of Motor Vehicles is constantly looking for ways to improve customer convenience and make our services easily accessible for all residents, and this is certainly a step in that direction," said Sarah Werner, a spokeswoman for the Colorado Department of Revenue. "This program will offer innovative solutions and use state-of-the-art technology to keep any sensitive information secure and private, enhancing fraud prevention and identity security options."

The app maker plans to develop user privacy measures, including facial and fingerprint recognition as well as personal identification numbers. Wallets eventually will become obsolete, with digital devices providing access to bank accounts, credit card numbers, identification, health care data and other information, Gemalto says.

Jim Harper, a cybersecurity and privacy researcher at the Cato Institute, said the development is clearly convenient — but that doesn't mean it's perfect.

"[Digital identification] may have the magnetic quality that the Social Security number did in its day, and everyone may use them for record keeping," Mr. Harper said. "That means even more threat to privacy than we have with existing identity systems."

Privacy isn't the only concern.

"If these systems are comprehensively used, the government issuers could use their control over your identity to regulate you," he said. "Did you fail to pay parking tickets or shovel the snow off your walk? You're de-identified until you do."

Having one's identity essentially held for ransom is a frightening thought, but it doesn't appear to be an immediate threat. Digital ID initially will serve as a companion, not a replacement, to physical driver's licenses.

But other problems could arise. A user could be stranded without ID for the loss of a cellphone or the death of a battery. That could pose a problem for a driver pulled over for speeding.

"A dead battery is essentially the [digital] equivalent of leaving your wallet at home," said Mr. Benitez, the Gemalto spokesman. "You can't show your plastic driver's license for verification if it's not in your possession, and likewise you can't show a digital version of your ID if your device doesn't have any power to function."

He suggests having alternative forms of identification on hand or memorizing your driver's license number.

In August, Gemalto was one of six companies awarded a grant from the Commerce Department's National Institute of Standards and Technology. More than $15 million was divided among the various pilots with the goal of creating a more secure online environment.

As everyday virtual reliance increases, the institute wants to stay ahead of the curve. The programs, which include health insurance and online shopping, will work toward making digital identities safer.

Gemalto's $2 million grant will fund the project for two years, during which time the company will develop, implement and analyze the potential success of its digital driver's license program.

"Gathering critical market data, realizing key benefits, identifying challenges and areas of improvement and refining the solution provides the best possible framework to drive future adoption," Mr. Benitez said.

This isn't the first program to explore secure virtual identity. Since 2014, the Iowa Department of Transportation has worked to create its own digital driver's license system. Its testing phase began last fall, but Iowa DOT has yet to implement the program on a statewide level.

"As with any new technology, there are potential challenges that will arise during implementation,"Gemalto's spokesman said. "Which is largely why a pilot development can be highly beneficial."

For now, the company is in early stages of working with the DMV, law enforcement and liquor control boards in all four localities to get the program off the ground.

The testing phase will begin next summer if everything goes according to plan, leaving public use of the program three to five years down the road.