Tisha Newsome has lived in Bridgeton all her life, and she’s worked across the street from 330 East Commerce Street, but she’s never known what goes on behind its barbed wire fence.

Not much seems to happen there, she said. She rarely sees anyone driving through the gate. There are large signs out front, but there’s nothing on them except hundreds of business names printed in small font. The warehouses on the property are quiet, and the giant parking lots surrounding them always seem to be empty.

And yet, 330 East Commerce Street is the most active site of used car sales in the entire state of New Jersey. At least that’s true by one measure: the number of temporary license plates churned out by dealerships registered to the address.

Those dealers numbered at least 300 last year, when together they issued more than 45,000 temporary license plates, data obtained by Streetsblog show. That should mean the dealers sold or leased 45,000 cars, as that’s virtually the only scenario in which dealers can legally print temp tags, as they’re known. That would be five cars sold every
hour, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. But Newsome has never even seen a car displayed for sale at the compound, let alone sold.

“There’s no cars on that lot,” she said one morning in December as she stood behind the cash register at the Dollar Tree across the street. “I don’t know what kind of place it is. It’s weird.”

It’s not the kind of place where dealers need much space to display cars, industry insiders and retired law enforcement officials told Streetsblog. Some Bridgeton dealers allegedly sell cars elsewhere. Others have been engaged in a different business: fraudulently issuing temporary license plates, which go for upwards of $100 on the black market and are coveted by drivers seeking to conceal their identities on the road.

Through interviews and public records, Streetsblog identified 53 dealers at the Bridgeton compound and other so-called “multi-dealer locations” across New Jersey that state auditors have caught violating temp tag regulations in recent years. At least three of those dealers told the state that they sold temp tags illegally, records show. Another four admitted it to Streetsblog in interviews.

Those 53 dealerships have issued more than 178,000 temp tags, according to data obtained by Streetsblog through records requests.
Multi-dealer locations are not unique to New Jersey. Georgia—another major source of temp tags in New York City—is also filled with office buildings that hardly resemble typical retail car businesses yet that each serve as the business address of dozens or even hundreds of licensed dealers. Some of them issue vast numbers of temp tags despite having no online inventories, online reviews or listings on Google Maps.

Some of these dealerships in Georgia and New Jersey are operated by people who live in New York City or its suburbs, Streetsblog found through public records and interviews. Such dealers include Donnon Nixon, who opened DDA Autos in a multi-dealer location in LaGrange, Georgia, in late 2021 or early 2022—around the time his dealership at a multi-dealer location in New Jersey was getting shut down for fraudulently issuing temp tags.

That did not stop Nixon from printing nearly 900 temp tags from his Georgia dealership in the last nine months of 2022, 98 percent of them to out-of-state buyers, data show. Dealers told Streetsblog that regulators typically do not scrutinize transactions involving out-of-state buyers, as the sales tax goes to the buyers’ home state.

In a brief phone interview, Nixon denied selling temp tags but declined to answer questions. He said he lives in Brooklyn.

Officials in Georgia caught at least 34 dealers violating temp tag regulations in 2022, records show.

The illicit temp tag trade has spawned a cohort of motorists in the
five boroughs who have relied on paper tags for anonymity while driving without car insurance, skipping out on tolls or sales tax, or breaking the law in more consequential ways. The New York City Police Department has described fraudulent license plates as a “nexus of criminality,” and paper tags have cropped up in robberies, shootings and hit-and-runs.

The locus of unusual temp tag activity is multi-dealer locations like those in Bridgeton and LaGrange, which exploit weak state regulations to serve licensed used car dealers, dozens of whom have gone on to fraudulently issue temps. In New Jersey, at least, industry watchdogs and state lawmakers have known about problems at multi-dealer locations, or MDLs, for years.

“The MDL, it’s a sham, and it’s a facilitator of all kinds of illicit and potentially illegal activity,” said Kathy Riley, a spokeswoman for the New Jersey State Commission of Investigation, which has investigated MDLs. “New Jersey has turned a blind eye to the abuses.”

Temp tag mills

or those looking to get into the temp tag business, there are few shorter routes than opening a used car dealership at the Bridgeton compound, which is called the New Jersey Dealer’s Auto Mall.

Authentic New Jersey temp tags are printed through a web portal created by the state’s Motor Vehicle Commission, but only licensed car dealers have access to that portal. That’s where NJDAM, the company that runs the compound, comes in.

For what Bridgeton dealers told Streetsblog is typically a four-figure fee, the company helps aspiring dealers get state licenses, then charges them to rent office space in the facility.

Like many things about the Auto Mall, those office spaces appear designed to minimally comply with New Jersey’s modest physical requirements for used car dealerships. The offices are small—the state requires they
measure only 72 square feet—and their walls do not extend to the ceiling. Some that are visible through a street window appeared to contain little more than a desk, chair, lamp, phone, and safe—all explicitly required under state law.

Outside, the compound’s expansive parking lots contain space for each dealer-tenant to display at least two cars—also the state minimum. And the small-print signs by the compound entrance are also a nod to a state requirement that every dealership have an exterior sign.

For the Motor Vehicle Commission, these token gestures appear to be sufficient. MVC site inspection reports obtained by Streetsblog show that officials raised no concerns about the Auto Mall when evaluating the license applications of two dealers who went on to print 73,000 temp tags before getting caught fraudulently issuing them.

Yet would-be car buyers would be hard pressed to take even a test drive at the Auto Mall. On a rainy morning in December, the front gate was closed, and a woman who answered the intercom told a Streetsblog reporter he could not speak to any of the hundreds of dealers registered to the address, even though the MVC requires used car dealerships to be open at least 20 hours per week.

“I’m sorry, we don’t have anybody here,” said the woman, who did not identify herself.
The Auto Mall did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Some 100 miles north, tucked incongruously into the idyllic hills above Hackettstown, New Jersey, an office building flanked by empty parking lots is the official address of dozens more licensed dealers, many of whom either have been caught fraudulently issuing temp tags or have generated large numbers of temp tags without any other discernible business activity. That includes Paa Kwesi Amissah, whose dealership, Peekay Auto Sales, printed 4,600 temp tags from 2020 to 2022, data show.

In an interview, Amissah admitted he sold about half of those temps illegally to other car dealers, including dealers in New York City, who then sold them to their customers. Amissah said he sold them for about $70 apiece (a below-average price, according to buyers and other sellers). At that price, Amissah could have made more than $150,000 in revenue from selling tags illegally.

Amissah was eventually caught by the MVC, which sent him a letter informing him that his dealer license was suspended and that he would be fined $500. That’s the maximum allowed for a first dealer violation under New Jersey law.

“I know I wasn’t supposed to sell temp tags,” said Amissah, who lives in New Jersey. “I have learned a whole lot of lessons.”

Streetsblog identified other dealers that issue large numbers of temp tags without many of the trappings of a normal retail car business. Among them is Zack Auto Sales, a dealership registered to an MDL in Delran, New Jersey.

The dealership has no website, no online inventory, no online reviews and no listing on Google Maps. Yet Streetsblog found it issued 999 temp tags last year, 71 percent of them to New Yorkers. The average New Jersey used car dealer gave out 165 tags last year, only around 20 percent to New Yorkers.

Zack Auto Sales has common ownership with a dealership on Staten Island, which occupies a fenced-in wedge of land under the Bayonne
Bridge that contains about 20 cars, a German Shepherd and a trailer. In December, a Streetsblog reporter visited the Staten Island dealership, identified himself as a journalist and asked whether the businesses sold New Jersey temp tags. In response, Manager Ali Ahmed asked the reporter whether he worked with the government and threatened to sue Streetsblog.

“If you’re going to go deep, and I find it, and you go to ask about my company in Trenton and New Jersey, you’re going to get trouble with it, believe me,” Ahmed said.

He said the dealership in New Jersey generates large numbers of temp tags because it sells many cars. As for how dealership employees do so without a website or online inventory, Ahmed said they “retail and wholesale [cars] online, like a broker.”

Streetsblog did not find evidence that Zack Auto Sales illegally sells temporary license plates. But one car wholesaler and one car broker based in New Jersey told Streetsblog that wholesalers and brokers have no reason to issue large numbers of temp tags.

The Georgia connection

New Jersey is not the only state with office buildings full of enigmatic dealerships producing large numbers of temporary license plates with little other discernible business activity. Analyzing Georgia Department of Revenue data obtained through records requests, Streetsblog identified 48 street addresses that each serves as the business address of ten or more used car dealers. Those dealers issued more than 84,000 temp tags last year.

Among these properties are a motel-like building in Fayetteville, a small city 20 miles south of Atlanta. The building is the business address of at least 16 used car dealers that printed 17,000 temp tags last year, 93 percent of them to out-of-state buyers.

One of those dealers is MSA Auto Sales, which issued 8,800 Georgia temps last year, 89 percent to out-of-state buyers, while having no website, no online inventory, no online reviews and no listing on Google Maps. The average Georgia used car dealership printed 117
This office building in Snellville, Georgia, is the registered address of car dealerships including D Lin Autos, which issued large numbers of temporary license plates last year, nearly all of them to out-of-state buyers, and which is operated by a woman who lives in the Bronx.

Photo: Blake Aued

temps last year, 22 percent of them to out-of-state buyers.

In a phone interview, MSA owner Mohamed Sefou denied he sold tags. He said his home address is in New York and that he also owns a dealership in New Jersey, which he declined to identify.

Thirty miles northeast of Atlanta, a red brick building at the end of a cul-de-sac in suburban Snellville, houses eight dealers, including D Lin Autos, which issued 3,000 temp tags last year, 99 percent of them out of state. The owner, Lin Pena, told Streetsblog that she lives in the Bronx. She denied selling tags but declined to answer questions.

Streetsblog visited the Fayetteville, Snellville and LaGrange dealers on a recent Saturday, typically a busy day for car dealerships. None was open.

Red flags ignored

In New Jersey, it’s a poorly kept secret that multi-dealer locations are breeding grounds for dubious temp tag activity.

In 2010, an internal Motor Vehicle Commission report noted that many dealers generate “temp tags far in excess of the number of vehicles they sell” and that “misuse of these materials can prove to be serious since they can be used to put unlicensed and/or unregistered and uninsured vehicles on the road.” The report found that nine of the top 10 temp tag issuers in the state were linked to the Bridgeton MDL. Four years later, records from a lawsuit show, the commission fined and suspended the licenses of two Bridgeton dealers for violating
temp tag rules. And around 2016, the commission fined and suspended the licenses of dealers at the Bridgeton and Hackettstown MDLs for producing fake sales receipts to cover up illegal temps.

Misuse of temp tags was one of many unscrupulous activities at multi-dealer locations identified in sweeping 2015 and 2018 reports by the New Jersey State Commission of Investigation, which found MDL dealers defrauding banks, accumulating millions of dollars in unpaid taxes and hiding mechanical defects in cars they sold. The then-owner of the Bridgeton MDL, Louis Civello Jr., had ties to the Bonanno organized crime family, the SCI wrote. Investigators even found one Hackettstown dealership that received suspicious payments from Lebanese financial institutions accused of laundering money for the militant group Hezbollah. (Business records show that the dealership closed in 2015.)

The SCI also found that abuses at the Bridgeton compound were overlooked by some at the MVC, with agency officials waiving penalties and site inspections for Auto Mall dealers and otherwise impeding efforts to regulate the facility. The Auto Mall even hired C. Richard Kamin, the former commissioner of the MVC under its previous name, the Division of Motor Vehicles, to lobby his old agency on behalf of the compound and its dealers.

Kamin, in an interview, dismissed the SCI investigation as politically motivated.

New Jersey took some steps to rein in the MDLs after SCI’s report, but abuses have continued.

“We tried to raise the alarm twice,” said Riley, the agency spokeswoman. “Nothing much has changed.”

New Jersey and Georgia have penalized or shut down dealerships for violating temp tag regulations, and the number of temp tags printed by New Jersey MDL dealers fell last year from 2021. But the number rose in Georgia, as have the number of dealers registered to MDLs in both states.

In a statement, MVC spokesman William Connolly said: “When MVC investigators uncover infractions, we take appropriate action. If there is inappropriate use of New Jersey’s e-temp tag system, dealer access is immediately cut off and, upon further investigation, the dealer’s license may be suspended or revoked. Penalties and fines as allowed
by statute are imposed. We refer any suspected fraudulent or illegal activity to law enforcement.”

Connolly did not respond to a question about what steps the MVC has taken to combat wrongdoing at MDLs.

Georgia Department of Revenue Spokesman Austin Gibbons said: “The Department has worked with law enforcement agencies and industry stakeholders to develop legislative approaches to address abuse in this area.”

Only one current MDL operator contacted by Streetsblog responded to requests for comment: Jacqueline Norris, president of George Yelland Inc., which owns the MDL in Delran, New Jersey. The facility consists of two single-story buildings parceled into small dealership offices. One property was busy on an afternoon in December, with dealers washing cars and customers wandering among sedans and SUVs in the display lot. The other property was lifeless—no one around, dealership offices locked. The two properties had at least 66 dealer-tenants last year that issued more than 7,900 temp tags.

Norris characterized her MDL as a good place for wholesalers who are frequently out of the office and for up-and-comers looking to get their footing before opening traditional dealership locations. She said dealers were not present at the second property on the day of Streetsblog’s visit because none keep business hours on that day. She said she hasn’t heard of any temp tag abuses at her facility. Regardless, she said, it’s the state’s job to crack down on dealer misconduct, not hers.

“If these dealers are not doing the right thing, then Motor Vehicle needs to be addressing it,” she said, referring to the MVC. “Even if I was aware that they were doing something, unfortunately, I’m just the landlord.”