

Police Cameras in Neighborhoods: serious questions need answers

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The Brookline Police Department is asking the Board of Selectmen to approve a plan to install Homeland Security-provided cameras here, hooked up to a network of eight other area police surveillance systems (“An eye on you,” Tab, 11/13).

We all want to be safe. But the claim that police cameras in public places reduce crime is not supported by the evidence, as opposed to minor and isolated anecdotes. And, despite the draft plan nominally addressing privacy and civil rights concerns, there are many questions that need answers before we head further down the road toward a total surveillance society. In theory and by law, though less in reality, the selectmen play a crucial role overseeing police policies. They should put the brakes on this proposal and subject it to much greater scrutiny than a public hearing scheduled for Thanksgiving week -- on two weeks notice and with town meeting absorbing the attention of community leaders this week.

Modern surveillance cameras are enormously powerful

The Chief of Police describes the proposal primarily as one for cameras at fixed locations along “evacuation” routes. But his draft Special Order is far broader. It states that among the goals of the new Video Camera Monitoring System are: detecting and deterring terrorism, deterring criminal activity and public disorder; reducing fear of crime; and gathering evidence for court actions. In addition to fixed cameras at twelve initial locations, there will be an unspecified number of mobile cameras.

What’s wrong with police cameras in public places, where, we are told, no one has a “legal expectation of privacy”? There’s nothing wrong with cameras in certain locations for limited periods based on specific investigatory needs, or in highly sensitive locations. But for general surveillance purposes, modern digital cameras have enormous power and capability to pan, tilt, zoom and rapidly rotate 360°. Some can “see” for more than a mile and at night, e.g. to zoom and see what people are reading or what political buttons they are wearing.

Data stored and shared

Even in public places, most people don’t want government agents watching them in the ways which Americans have condemned police states for elsewhere. And even if Brookline police are better than elsewhere, this program will share data with many other government agencies -- in an era in which spying on Americans without warrants has become commonplace. Nor have the Brookline police been immune to filming and photographing people during lawful demonstrations, highlighting questions of where this information will end up. **More answers are needed about plans for sharing and storing the digitized information.**

There are also financial questions. What is the \$15,000 per year cost estimate based on; is it realistic, and does it include costs of replacing cameras and monitoring them?

Studies show police surveillance cameras aren't worthwhile

The Selectmen also need to look at evidence from the many studies that show that video monitoring has little or no effect on reducing crime. Britain, which installed huge numbers of cameras, has seen violent crime rates rise. And “harassment by video camera” has occurred, as some British officers, bored with their monitoring jobs, were focusing cameras on women’s body parts. Another study found police aiming cameras more at people of color. While these actions would be prohibited under the proposed policy, misuses may be likely, which highlights the question of whether, given the lack of proven effectiveness and the cost of surveillance cameras, is it worth the risks and privacy losses? Studies show that more officers on streets is more effective than having them watching people on monitors. Improved lighting and good community policing techniques are also useful.

Many municipalities that jumped on the bandwagon of surveillance cameras got rid of them because they didn’t achieve much - not crime prevention, not terrorism prevention, not even crime solving. Now, with billions of Homeland Security dollars thrown around, more communities are jumping back on the bandwagon, but is it worth it? This money would better be spent on live police officers doing real community policing, and not jeopardizing and reducing our liberty.

Balancing liberty and security requires more effort by selectmen

Using surveillance cameras to observe and record the activities, associations, and movements of vast numbers of law-abiding citizens is a decision that needs to be very carefully made. As legal scholar Walter Gellhorn said, “Restrictions justified as necessary safeguards of freedom may in fact safeguard freedom out of existence altogether.” Before we simply accept the assertion that surveillance cameras in public places will make us safer, we need to see hard evidence and thoroughly understand all the ramifications. The Selectmen should slow down and more fully consider the underlying question: Does pervasive monitoring of public spaces destroy the very essence of a free society?