



City of Sebastopol

CITY OF SEBASTOPOL CITY COUNCIL

AGENDA ITEM REPORT FOR MEETING OF: September 15, 2026

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To: Honorable Mayor and City Councilmembers

From: Sean McDonagh, Chief of Police

Responsible Department: Police Department

Subject: Report on Exigent Use of Surveillance Technology (Automated License Plate Reader Data) Pursuant to SMC 8.80.040 – July 30, 2026 Incident

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RECOMMENDATION(S):

That the City Council receive and file this report regarding the Sebastopol Police Department's exigent use of surveillance technology (Automated License Plate Reader data) on July 30, 2026, submitted pursuant to Sebastopol Municipal Code (SMC) Section 8.80.040.

PROCESS OF AGENDA ITEM:

- If the item remains on the Consent Calendar, no presentation is required, and the item will be approved as part of the Consent Calendar.
- If the item is removed from the Consent Calendar, it will be heard as a regular agenda item and will proceed as follows:
 - a. Presentation by staff
 - b. Council questions and discussion
 - c. Public comment
 - d. Council deliberation and action

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

On July 30, 2026, the Sebastopol Police Department requested and received Automated License Plate Reader (ALPR) data from local law enforcement agencies, the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office and the Santa Rosa Police Department, to help locate a vehicle connected to a report of a woman in apparent distress. The Sebastopol Police Department does not own or operate ALPR technology; because officers relied on other agencies' systems under time-sensitive circumstances, the request is considered an exigent use of surveillance technology under SMC 8.80.040, which requires that any such use be reported to the City Council within 60 days. The exigency lasted approximately two hours, from the initial request until it was rescinded after officers confirmed the woman's welfare.

BACKGROUND:

SMC 8.80.040 governs the Police Department's use of surveillance technology, including exigent circumstances in which officers reasonably believe there is an imminent danger to life or another emergency that requires action before a formal use policy or approval process can be followed. When such an exigent use occurs, the ordinance requires the Police Department to report the details of the use to the City Council within 60 days. The attached memorandum documents the July 30, 2026 exigent use of ALPR data and is provided to the Council to satisfy this requirement.

DISCUSSION:

On July 30, 2026, at approximately 3:11 p.m., the Police Department received a report from an employee of a local business describing a suspicious circumstance that had occurred minutes earlier: an unidentified woman, accompanied by an unidentified man, had passed the employee a note reading "I NEED HELP" before driving away with the man in the passenger seat.



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Officers responded to search for the vehicle and to interview the reporting employee. A review of the business's own surveillance camera footage, which did not involve ALPR, facial recognition, or other biometric technology, allowed an officer to identify the vehicle's license plate and, through a prior booking photo, to identify the registered owner as the woman seen in the footage. Officers were unable to locate a residential address or a working phone number for her.

Given the content of the note, the woman's apparent distress, and indications that she did not want her companion to know she had passed the note, the on-duty officer determined that an exigency existed, a reasonable concern that the woman could be in imminent danger, the victim of a crime such as kidnapping, or in need of medical attention. A Be On the Lookout (BOL) alert was issued through standard law-enforcement channels, and dispatch contacted the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office to request a search of their FLOCK ALPR system for the vehicle.

- At approximately 3:42 p.m., the Sheriff's Office reported the vehicle's last known FLOCK-detected location, in Santa Rosa about 20 minutes earlier, along with one photograph of the vehicle. The Santa Rosa Police Department was asked to check its own FLOCK system and patrol the area.
- At approximately 4:36 p.m., Santa Rosa PD reported a FLOCK detection placing the vehicle in Rohnert Park at about 4:11 p.m. The Rohnert Park Department of Public Safety was notified and asked to check the area.
- Because the vehicle appeared to be traveling south, a BOL was also sent to law enforcement agencies in counties south of Sonoma County.

While this search was underway, officers and dispatch continued working to reach the woman directly. At approximately 5:15 p.m., they located a phone number for an associate of the woman, who connected her with an officer by phone. The woman confirmed she had passed the note but stated she did not need police assistance; she later came to the police station in person and again declined further assistance.

At approximately 5:30 p.m., once contact with the woman had been confirmed, the Department rescinded all outstanding requests for FLOCK information from allied agencies. In total, the exigent use lasted approximately two hours, from the initial request to its rescission. Other than the single vehicle photograph provided by the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office, no other images or data were received, and no information obtained during the exigency was shared with any other agency, network, or third party.

STAFF ANALYSIS:

The Department did not use or own ALPR technology directly; it relied on data voluntarily shared by neighboring agencies, and no data obtained was retained, further disseminated, or used beyond the immediate welfare check.

CITY COUNCIL GOALS/PRIORITIES AND GENERAL PLAN CONSISTENCY:

This agenda item represents the City Council goals/priorities as follows:

Goal 4: High-Performance Organization

Restoring public trust through transparent and inclusive processes, and ensuring accountability and oversight of Police Department surveillance technology use consistent with SMC Chapter 8.80.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

As of the writing of this staff report, the City has not received any public comment. However, if staff receives public comment from interested parties following the publication and distribution of this staff report, such comments will be provided to the City Council as supplemental materials before or at the meeting. In addition, public comments may be offered during the public comment portion of the agenda item.

PUBLIC NOTICE:

This item was noticed in accordance with the Ralph M. Brown Act and was available for public viewing and review at least 72 hours prior to the scheduled meeting date.



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FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact to the City associated with this informational report.

RESTATED RECOMMENDATION:

That the City Council receive and file this report regarding the Police Department's exigent use of surveillance technology (Automated License Plate Reader data) on July 30, 2026, submitted pursuant to SMC Section 8.80.040.

OPTIONS:

1. Request additional information or clarification from Police Department staff.

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment 1 – Sebastopol Police Department Memorandum: Report on Exigent Use of Surveillance Technology Pursuant to SMC 8.80.040, dated August 10, 2026

APPROVALS:

Department Head Approval: Approval Date: _____

CEQA Determination (Planning): Approval Date: _____

The proposed action is not a project under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

Administrative Services (Financial) Approval Date: _____

Costs authorized in City Approved Budget: N/A – no cost associated with this action

City Attorney Approval: Approval Date: _____

City Manager Approval: Approval Date: _____



SEBASTOPOL POLICE DEPARTMENT

Agenda Item Number 5

Memorandum

Sean McDonagh
Chief of Police

To: Sebastopol City Council

From: Lieutenant Andy Bauer

Date: 8/10/2026

Subject: Report on exigent use of surveillance technology pursuant to SMC 8.80.040

This report is provided pursuant to SMC 8.80.040, to advise the Sebastopol City Council about the temporary exigent use of surveillance technology, which occurred on Thursday, July 30, 2026. Ordinance SMC 8.80.040 requires a report to the City Council within 60 days of any exigent use of certain surveillance technologies, including Automated License Plate Readers (ALPRs).

On Thursday, July 30, 2026, at approximately 3:11 PM, the Sebastopol Police Department received a call from an employee of a local business, regarding a suspicious circumstance which occurred less than 10 minutes prior. The reporting party advised an unidentified female, in the company of an unidentified male, passed a note to an employee that said, "I NEED HELP." The female then drove away in a vehicle with the male subject in the passenger seat.

The employee provided a description of both the male and female, as well as of the vehicle, but no license plate number, as well as a direction of travel. Officers responded to the area to search for the vehicle, while one officer responded to the business to speak with the reporting party. After speaking with the reporting party and reviewing the business' traditional surveillance camera footage (no ALPR, no facial recognition, no biometrics, etc.), the officer learned the female appeared in distress and panicked for reasons which were not known. Also, it appeared she passed the note to the employee in a manner indicating she did not want the male she was with to be aware of it. In viewing the surveillance footage, the officer was able to determine a license plate for the vehicle. A previous booking photo of the registered owner was a match to the female seen in the business' surveillance video. The address for the registered owner on file with DMV was a post office box and not a physical address. As such, officers were unable to locate a residence to respond to, to check the female's welfare. Additionally, phone numbers located for the registered owner were no longer in service or calls to them were unanswered.

Because it was unknown what type of help the female needed, whether or not she was in immediate danger, or what her location was, a Be On the Lookout (BOL) for the vehicle and circumstances was provided to other local law enforcement agencies through traditional police channels (by phone and teletype), requesting the female's welfare be checked if located. Officers and dispatch continued to search for the vehicle, as well as research the vehicle and registered owner for possible contact information, but without success.

At this time, based on the content of the note passed, the report that the female appeared in distress, that she apparently did not want the male in her company to be aware of the note, I was concerned for the

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immediate safety of the female and believed it was possible she was an imminent danger. I believed an exigency existed to locate her quickly to check her welfare, determine if she was the victim of a crime (such as kidnapping), or required medical attention.

I authorized dispatch to contact the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office and request they review their FLOCK ALPR system for the location of the vehicle. At approximately 3:42 PM, they advised dispatch the vehicle's last known location was in Santa Rosa about 20 minutes before and provided one photo of the vehicle. Dispatch requested Santa Rosa Police Department to check the area for the vehicle and check their FLOCK system for the vehicle. At approximately 4:36 PM, SRPD advised that FLOCK showed the vehicle in Rohnert Park at approximately 4:11 PM. Rohnert Park Department of Public Safety was advised and requested to check the area.

As the vehicle appeared to be headed southbound, a teletype BOL was sent to counties immediately south of Sonoma County.

Meanwhile, officers and dispatch continued to look for ways to contact the female. A phone number was located, and answered, for a person associated with the female, who put her in touch with an officer by phone at approximately 5:15 PM. The female identified herself and confirmed she had passed the note to the employee but stated she did not require police assistance at that time. She later came to the police station and met with the officer but declined any further police assistance.

At approximately 5:30 PM, once contact with the female was made, all requests for information from FLOCK from allied agencies were rescinded. The total time from the request until the request was rescinded at the conclusion of the exigency was approximately two hours. Other than the single photo of the vehicle provided by the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office, no other images or data were provided to the Sebastopol Police Department. The location information provided was given verbally to dispatch over the phone by members of the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office or Santa Rosa Police Department. None of the information provided was disseminated to any other agency, network, or third party.