

Public Comment on the Use of Surveillance Technology in Sebastopol

The “Surveillance Technology and Community Safety Ordinance” adopted by the City of Sebastopol originated from a request made to Councilmember Una Glass by the Sonoma County ACLU. That organization provided both a draft ordinance and supporting language.

As has often been the case, Sebastopol sought to position itself as a leader, with the apparent intent of influencing other cities in Sonoma County and across the state to adopt similar ordinances. It should not go unnoticed that the same ACLU has cost the cities at least \$1,000,000 in litigation costs that could have gone a long way to fixing our rotten streets.

The current ordinance creates unintended consequences. It appears to prohibit the use of even privately owned tools, such as Ring doorbells, to identify and prosecute criminals. This restriction undermines residents’ own efforts to deter and document crime.

Leadership may have been a goal, but five years later, no other city in Sonoma County adopted a comparable ordinance, nor has the County itself. At the same time, there is clear evidence that cities throughout the county—including Petaluma, Santa Rosa, Sonoma, and Healdsburg—have implemented license plate readers (ALPR networks) and downtown video surveillance. There is no indication that these technologies have been used to suppress civil liberties. It is likely they are helping to detect, deter and convict criminals.

At the time the ordinance was adopted, it seemed odd that a city facing significant crime challenges would fail to seriously consider how technology could support public safety. Sebastopol’s location places it at the intersection of two major traffic corridors, making it particularly vulnerable to drive-in, drive-out property crime. Crime today is increasingly mobile, and offenders often do not reside locally. Recent shoplifting incidents involving individuals coming from San Francisco highlight this reality.

Because of its location Sebastopol has the highest rates of violent and property crime of any city in the County. The numbers are not high but for a small city they are significant. With only 1.9 square miles none of us are far from a crime when it happens.

In a city that consistently struggles to fund adequate police staffing, surveillance technology can serve as a force multiplier—especially when staffing levels are low or demand is unusually high. The city’s compact downtown footprint presents an opportunity: a small number of strategically placed cameras could cover a large portion of commercial areas. Likewise, because nearly all traffic enters and exits the city via two major highways, a limited number of perimeter cameras could effectively monitor egress routes and assist in identifying suspects involved in vehicle-related crimes.

Surveillance tools are particularly effective in deterring property crime, an area where Sebastopol currently ranks highest in Sonoma County. Rather than continuing to blindly follow an ACLU template, the city might consider a local task force to develop a balanced, Sebastopol-specific plan for using technology to enhance public safety. A task force could recommend reasonable safeguards tailored to our community.

The goal is to reduce Sebastopol's property crime rate and improve public safety while respecting civil liberties. Other small Northern California cities—such as Novato, Rio Vista, Tracy, and San Rafael—have successfully implemented ALPR networks, and regional coordination already exists through the Sonoma County Sheriff's auto theft task force. Sebastopol has the opportunity to pursue common sense advances with sensible checks and balances rather than remaining an outlier.

