GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Flock camera fight heads to Elk Grove City Council as privacy concerns grow

Mayor Bobbie Singh-Allen and the City Council have given little public indication they are prepared to abandon the city's ALPR network

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August 17, 2026 . 9:00 AM — 5 min read



An Elk Grove Police Department Flock ALPR on East Stockton Blvd. between Bond and Sheldon roads.

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Like many American communities, Elk Grove residents are voicing concerns about automated license plate recognition (ALPR) reader technology deployed by local police departments. A local group, DeFlock Elk Grove, is pressing Elk Grove Mayor Bobbie Singh-Allen and her city council to remove the city's Flock ALPR monitors stationed throughout the city.

The group is now calling on residents to attend the August 26 Elk Grove City Council meeting and demand that the city cancel its contract with Flock Safety — and not simply replace the company's cameras with license plate readers from another manufacturer.

The call comes as opposition to automated license plate readers has grown nationally amid concerns over privacy, data sharing and documented cases in which law enforcement personnel allegedly used the systems for personal purposes.

DeFlock Elk Grove said in an August 16 posting that Singh-Allen and Councilmember Darren Suen initially indicated they were willing to meet with the group after reviewing a community audit it prepared on Elk Grove's Flock system. The organization said it has received no indication since then of when or whether those meetings will occur.

According to DeFlock, Singh-Allen subsequently said she wanted to wait until Elk Grove Police Chief Bobby Davis had completed his review of the group's findings. During the August 12 City Council meeting, Singh-Allen said the city was formulating a response to concerns surrounding Flock.

The organization said residents should be included in that process and renewed its request for city officials to meet with them.

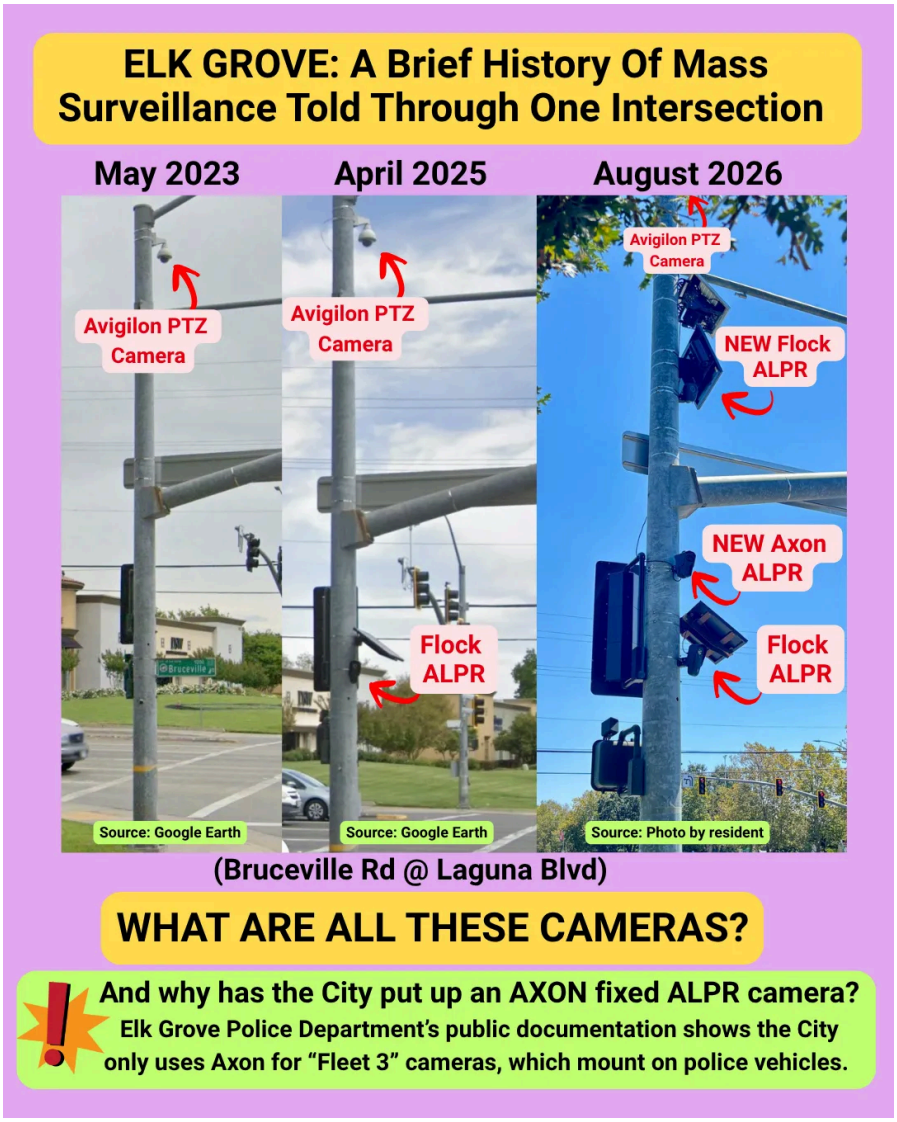
DeFlock is asking residents to attend the August 26 meeting in person or submit comments remotely. Its demand goes beyond Flock: The organization wants Elk Grove to cancel its Flock contract and not replace the cameras with ALPR technology from Axon, Genetec, Motorola Vigilant, Leonardo, or another vendor.

The organization is also encouraging residents to sign a petition, distribute flyers, contact neighbors, and participate in other activities as part of the August 16-22 National Week of Action Against ALPRs.

Questions about another camera

DeFlock's latest post also raises questions about what appears to be a newly installed Axon license plate reader at the intersection of Bruceville Road and Laguna Boulevard.

continued below



According to the organization, residents recently identified what appears to be an Axon ALPR mounted on a traffic-signal pole at the northwest corner of the intersection. The group says the pole also has two Flock ALPR cameras and an Avigilon pan-tilt-zoom camera.

A graphic published by DeFlock shows what the organization describes as the growth of surveillance equipment at the intersection between May 2023 and August 2026.

DeFlock believes the newly observed device is an Axon Outpost fixed ALPR, which combines livestreaming, license plate reading, and vehicle-recognition capabilities. The organization questioned why a fixed Axon reader would be installed because, it says, Elk Grove Police Department's publicly available documentation identifies the city's Axon ALPR use as "Fleet 3" cameras mounted on police vehicles.

The group's posting does not establish who installed the apparent Axon device or for what purpose. Those questions remain for the city and police

department to answer.

DeFlock also says the intersection illustrates its broader concern about the accumulation of surveillance technology. The group says Flock cameras collect vehicle location, date and time along with characteristics including make, model, color and identifying features that can be converted into searchable information.

National concerns grow

The Elk Grove dispute is unfolding as Flock faces growing national scrutiny.

The American Civil Liberties Union has launched a national campaign opposing Flock and other ALPR networks, saying communities across the country have persuaded governments to cancel contracts or restrict their use. The ACLU argues the technology can create extensive records of people's movements even though the overwhelming majority of vehicles photographed are not associated with criminal activity.

An Associated Press report published August 14 said more than 50 jurisdictions have ended their relationships with Flock. The company, responding to the controversy, has announced changes that include requiring law enforcement agencies to use auditing tools to detect abnormal searches, tying searches to case numbers and reducing its standard data-retention period from 30 days to seven beginning January 1.

The potential for misuse is more than theoretical.

In Georgia, a series of investigations this summer resulted in law enforcement officers being arrested or fired after authorities alleged they used Flock systems for reasons unrelated to legitimate police work.

Five Albany police officers were fired and arrested after an internal audit uncovered what the department described as serious policy violations involving its Flock system. Three Richmond County Sheriff's Office personnel were subsequently charged after investigators alleged they searched license plates for reasons unrelated to official law enforcement purposes.

In another case, a Habersham County sheriff's deputy was fired and arrested after an audit found he allegedly accessed license plate information for personal purposes involving someone with whom he had a personal relationship.

Those cases have added weight to privacy advocates' argument that policies and internal safeguards alone cannot eliminate the possibility that individuals with authorized access will misuse the technology.

Flock and law enforcement agencies, however, argue ALPR systems can be valuable investigative tools for finding stolen vehicles, locating missing people and identifying vehicles associated with crimes. The Habersham County sheriff, even as he announced the firing and arrest of his deputy, defended Flock as a law enforcement tool that has helped save lives.

Recently, Sacramento County Sheriff Jim Cooper posted a social media video (see below) arguing that disinformation about ALPRs exists and defending their use as an effective crime-fighting tool. While Cooper defended the technology and assured the department's compliance with the law, extensive comments on the post expressed opposing views.

That debate is increasingly reaching city halls across the country.

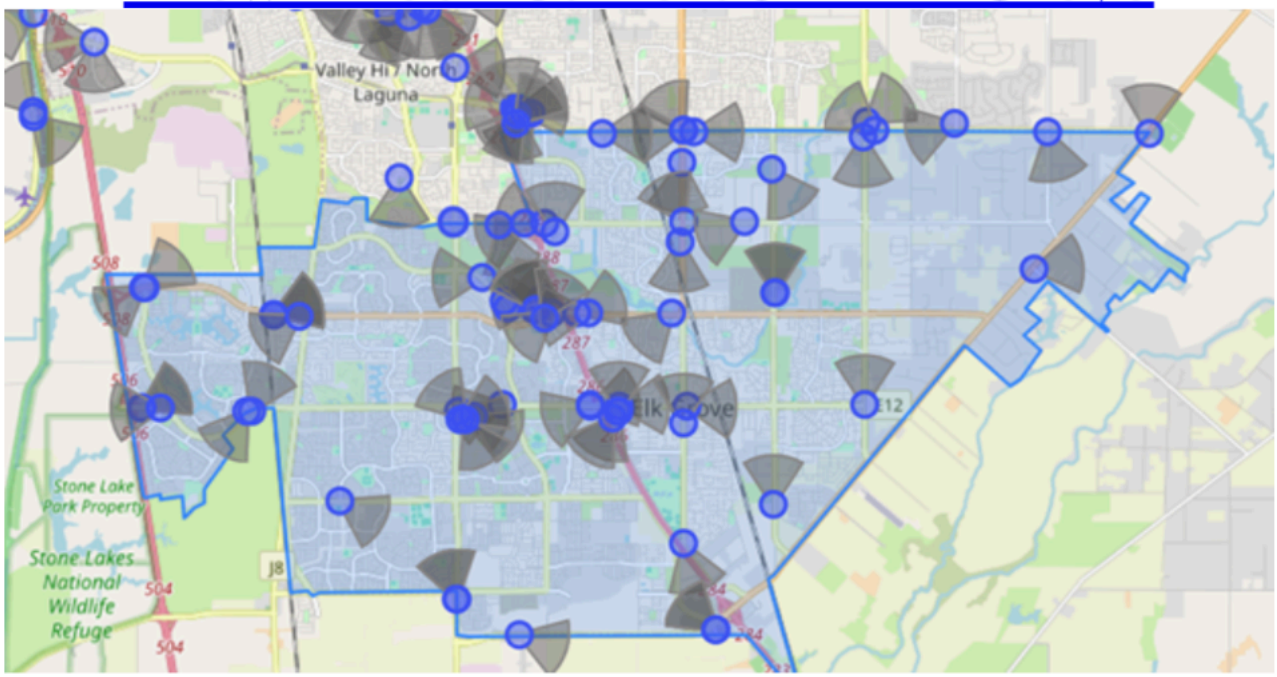
In Elk Grove, Singh-Allen and the City Council have given little public indication they are prepared to abandon the city's ALPR network. The mayor's August 12 statement that the city is preparing a response suggests officials are reviewing the controversy, but DeFlock Elk Grove wants considerably more direct public oversight — and intends to bring that demand before the council Aug. 26.

For DeFlock Elk Grove, replacing one company's cameras with another company's technology would not resolve the underlying issue.

"Let the City know what you think about this surveillance," the organization told residents in urging them to participate in the August 26 meeting.

Flock cameras in Elk Grove

Known Flock Cameras in Elk Grove



map from Deflock.org shows the location of Flock Safety's AI-powered Automated License Plate Readers (ALPRs) used by the Elk Grove Police Department.

View this post on Instagram

A post shared by Sacramento Sheriff's Office (@sacsheriff)

Comments 1