GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Part 2: Elk Grove residents challenge police defense of ALPR surveillance

One speaker described the potential consequences of an incorrect license plate read

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One person who spoke during public comment criticized comments from Sacramento County Sheriff Jim Cooper who said ALPR opponents were misguided.

ELK GROVE, CALIF. - Residents challenging Elk Grove's use of automated license plate readers said Wednesday that law enforcement officials failed to answer the central question surrounding the technology: Whether solving some crimes justifies recording the movements of every motorist, including people suspected of no wrongdoing.

The testimony came during non-agenda public comment and later during the Elk Grove City Council's Sept. 9 hearing on the Police Department's ALPR program. In Part 1, Elk Grove Police Chief Bobby Davis, Sacramento County Sheriff Jim Cooper and Sacramento County District Attorney Thien Ho defended the cameras as effective investigative tools.

The proceedings can be reviewed in the video below.

Opponents did not dispute that ALPR information can help solve crimes. Instead, they questioned whether law enforcement's examples established that the cameras reduce crime or are indispensable.

Lindsay said officials relied on emotional stories without presenting comprehensive measurements of how many cases were cleared specifically because of Flock cameras.

"If all they do tonight is share emotional anecdotes, we don't know if the system is as important as they claim it is," she said.

Another speaker described ALPRs as reversing the traditional sequence of an investigation. Rather than investigating identified suspects after a crime, she said, police collect information on everyone and search it later.

"We are all under mass investigation every day," she said. "We are all under investigation at all times and for all crimes."

Justin, who said he installs servers and control systems, challenged the department's reliance on a court ruling involving a single camera. Elk Grove operates approximately 90 Flock cameras, he said, allowing vehicles to be recorded repeatedly as they travel across the city.

Justin also criticized Cooper's description of opponents as uninformed or misguided.

"Seeing him say that people know nothing and we're misguided was really disturbing," Justin said. He also rejected Cooper's comparison of ALPRs with smartphones that collect personal information, saying one form of intrusive data collection does not justify another.

Ellen called Cooper's suggestion that opponents were indifferent to crime victims "defamatory and offensive."

"I live here. I have a 6-year-old son, and I want this to be our forever community," she said. "I want crimes to be solved."

Other speakers said the law enforcement presentations did not squarely answer questions about government collection of information from innocent motorists, outside-agency access or Flock's control of the underlying system.

Dan, who called in his comments, highlighted what he saw as a contradiction in the police presentation. Officials said the cameras do not

continuously track vehicles, but they also described investigators retracing a suspect vehicle's movements between cameras.

"That sure sounds like continuous tracking to me," he said.

Brian, who identified himself as a representative of the privacy advocacy organization Secure Justice, described the potential consequences of an incorrect license plate read.

"My brother and I had four guns pointed at our heads by the Contra Costa sheriff's deputies due to a mistaken license plate read," Brian said.

His account was not independently verified during the meeting, but it directly challenged the presentation's distinction between technological errors and failures of police protocol. Brian said even a temporary error can expose an innocent person to a dangerous gunpoint detention.

He also argued that allowing other agencies to search Elk Grove's records prevents the city from exercising meaningful real-time oversight over who is searching the data and why.

Matt described the system as a surveillance dragnet because it retains information about every passing vehicle, not only those connected to crimes.

"What is worth hiding can change," he said, citing abortion laws as an example of conduct that can be legal one day and criminalized later.

Councilmember Kevin Spease said he understood the concern. He compared the "nothing to hide" argument with paying taxes: Complying with the law does not mean someone wants to be audited every year.

"You cannot have public safety without protection of civil rights," Spease said. "They go hand in hand."

Councilmember Rod Brewer connected much of the public anxiety to President Donald Trump and the federal government. Referring to "1,600 Pennsylvania Avenue," Brewer said that was "where all the anxiety and fear comes into play."

Nevertheless, Brewer supported continued use of the technology, saying Flock cameras had saved lives and provided "great service" in Elk Grove and Sacramento County.

“Freedom isn’t free,” Brewer said. “For me, that’s one concession I’m willing to live with.”

The council took no action and did not direct city staff or the Police Department to obtain an independent audit, revise the program or return with additional information addressing the unresolved concerns.

Adella closed the in-person testimony by warning that the debate should not rest solely on the intentions of current officials.

“The restraint you’ve shown is a choice, not a safeguard built into the system,” she said. “Good governance today is not a guarantee of good governance tomorrow. A free society, a democracy, shouldn’t build a tool that only stays safe as long as the right people are holding it.”





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