

Frequently Asked Questions

Why do we need an ad hoc surveillance advisory board?

Police departments are increasingly making use of new and untested types of surveillance technology. As of now, there is very little opportunity for the community to give input to what types of surveillance equipment are being used. The ad hoc surveillance advisory board builds in common sense practices to the process of considering technology adoption, including collecting public input and reviewing best practices in other jurisdictions.

What is the purpose of this board?

The responsibilities of the advisory board include:

- To advise the City of Vallejo on best practices to protect the safety, privacy, and civil rights of Vallejo residents in connection with surveillance technology;
- To submit recommendations, findings, and reports to City staff and the City Council related to surveillance technology, including whether the City Council should reject or cease the use of a particular surveillance technology;
- To draft and recommend for City Council consideration model legislation on matters relevant to surveillance technology;
- To conduct meetings and create a space for public input and comment about the impact of surveillance practices on their lives; and
- To analyze and request information about the City's current and proposed surveillance technologies and make recommendations to the City Council;

Will the Council have to accept the proposals that come from the board?

The board's recommendations would not be binding. However, it provides the Council with research, cost-benefit analysis, and crucial community input about a surveillance proposal.

Will the advisory board take up a lot of staff time?

The advisory board only requires 1 staff member. It is intended to be primarily led by community residents and privacy experts.

How is this different from the police oversight commission? A police oversight commission is generally given some powers beyond an advisory board, including some investigatory capacity. The surveillance oversight board will not be involved in law enforcement discipline or incident analysis, but will focus on policy, practice and cost to benefit analysis on the use of surveillance and spying tech.

Is this being set up to spy on police?

The purpose of this board is to provide more transparency to the community as well as more direct community input, research, and analysis to city council. Any proposals, data, reports, etc would be directly from the police department and available as public records. The Council has a responsibility to oversee the Vallejo PD as the city's elected officials, and the advisory board is intended to assist in doing so.

Myths vs Facts

Myth: *Surveillance technology helps reduce crime by preventing them from happening.*

Fact: Many surveillance technologies have never been proven to reduce or prevent criminal activity. Statements that surveillance technologies reduce or prevent crime have to be fact checked and reviewed.

Myth: *Technology is neutral because it uses science and algorithms.*

Fact: Technology automates processes based on human input and training and often reflects the bias, both explicit and implicit, that are fed into the technology. Surveillance tech should always be reviewed for whether disparate impact, both in deployment or in outcomes, is present.

Myth: *Surveillance will help fill in the gap of a understaffed department*

Fact: While rumor has had it for a long time, that technology will replace human beings, and it is possible some jobs like professional driving may be at risk for that, policing is not one of those professions. Technology cannot perform the many tasks a police officer performs. Some technology may help speed up some tasks. Others are subject to elaborate and often inaccurate claims in sales brochures. The advisory committee can help to distinguish those differences.

Myth: *You don't need to worry about surveillance if you have nothing to hide*

Fact: As Edward Snowden put it: that's like saying you don't care about freedom of speech because you have nothing to say. Many surveillance technologies work by treating everyone as a suspect, regardless of whether you have done anything wrong or not. Civil rights are there for when they are needed and in many cases, you don't need to worry until you do.