

Selectmen's hearing on video surveillance proposal, 11/25/08

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You've seen PAX's initial statement on this proposal in the TAB last week. Having read a bit more since then – especially the British study *Assessing the impact of CCTV* (available as a pdf file at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs05/hors292.pdf>) – I'd like to provide some additional details.

First, a general observation. Most of us in this quiet, law-abiding town are not nearly so frightened of the present and the future as the drum majors of fear of recent years would like us to be. Most of us would prefer that our finite tax contributions be spent on smaller class sizes and universal health care than on a heavily militarized society with Big Brotherly eyes capable of feeding our identities and daily activities 24/7 into state and federal data bases historically notorious for their misuse and abuse.

The comments below are in three areas : the effectiveness of public video surveillance in reducing crime, its cost, and future “mission creep.”

EFFECTIVENESS IN PREVENTING CRIME

Assessing the impact of CCTV (close-circuit TV, Britain's terminology for video surveillance systems) is a 175-page report published in 2005 by the Research, Development and Statistics Directorate of the British Home Office, which exists, according to the report, “to provide the public and Parliament with information necessary for informed debate.” (p. 2 of pdf, available online at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs05/hors292.pdf>)

The foreword states that “No previous research has examined in such detail the issues faced in ensuring effective operation of CCTV systems. The authors have undertaken a painstaking analysis of the effectiveness of systems, both with respect to the impact on crime as recorded by the police and wider measures ...” (p. 3)

The main objective of the study was “to measure the impact of the CCTV projects on crime and fear of crime.” Of the thirteen representative systems evaluated, with as many as 600 video cameras, “only two showed a statistically significant [crime] reduction relative to the control, and in one of these cases the change could be explained by the presence of confounding variables. Crime increased in seven areas ...” (p. 8)

The report points out that in a separate meta-analysis conducted in 2002, of the eighteen studies included, half showed a desirable effect and half did not. (p. 20) And the Home Office study concludes that “the review of previous work does not offer conclusive evidence that CCTV on its own impacts positively on crime levels.” (p. 20)

In the twelve areas where public attitudes were surveyed, citizens who were aware of the local presence of cameras actually worried *more* about becoming a victim of crime than those who were not. In residential areas, the percentage of those who perceived the impact of CCTV to be

positive decreased following its installation in all the areas surveyed.” (p. 11)

COST

We need to see not simply a rough estimate of the equipment maintenance portion of the anticipated budget for the proposal, but a realistic, fully detailed accounting of the dollar value of Police Department and Town Hall personnel time and other resources that would be required to implement this proposal. We understand that this will be an onerous task; the extensiveness of the required budget is a reflection of nature of the work required throughout the police department and in Town Hall. Of the following partial list of examples, most have been taken from the Chief’s undated 10-page *Draft Special Order VCMS*:

- policy development and periodic review
- continuing multi-faceted training and updating of current and new personnel
- frequent discussion throughout the police department of implementation details and updates
- equipment inspection and reports
- collaborative communication with fellow Metro-Boston Homeland Security Region communities
- tracking the chain of custody of recordings and reproductions of footage obtained from other communities and state or federal agencies
- live (“real time”) monitoring in the Dispatch Area, the Emergency Operations Center, the Detective Division and the office of the Commanding Officer
- maintenance, storage and tracking of the “Daily Recording”
- daily maintenance of the camera inventory log by the Technology Division
- daily checking of all “preferred camera views”
- establishment and administration of user names, passwords and Operation Access Codes for all police officers and dispatchers
- maintaining records of and responding to requests from other communities to view real-time images or archival footage and, in reverse, making such requests and tracking responses
- tracking the periods of employment of mobile cameras
- studying and reviewing potential software and hardware acquisitions and upgrades (e.g., automatic identification or automated tracking programs)
- ensuring the chain of custody of recordings and reproductions of video footage for evidentiary purposes in civil and criminal court actions
- use of space for system components and operators that would otherwise be available for alternative uses compensation of external consultants
- legal work in preparing the Town’s defense against (let alone settling) citizen suits
- preparation and presentation of system-related budget requests

- surveillance-related work performed by Town administrators and others in staffing the Board of Selectmen and other Town agencies
- surveillance-related work performed by the office of Town Counsel (including defense against – let alone settling – citizen suits) and by Finance Department employees

FUTURE MISSION CREEP

Proponents who initially recommend a certain quantity and quality of equipment for a program of this sort will inevitably return later to recommend more, and better. The denial of requests to broaden the mission will be as difficult then as denying the proposal before you is today. It's estimated that Britain, which at one point had only a few cameras, now has one for every thirteen citizens. There will be various kinds of impetus for future requests:

- to increase tracking capability – obtain more cameras, and cameras with greater resolving power, to track offenders as they move from one area to another – ultimately, to keep them continuously in view. (According to the UK report, “the main objective of urban centre systems was to track offenders.”) More – and better – cameras.
- to increase analytic capability – acquire computer programs currently available or under development that increase the capability of the system, e.g., image enhancement, or automatic identification of suspects by correlating their images with previously established dossiers of biometric or other data. (Each program necessitates more extensive training of police and others.) More-intrusive computer programs.
- to foil “crime displacement” – The Home Office study points out that “[t]he danger in covering only hotspot areas is displacement of crime” into other nearby areas. The more serious the crime (i.e., the greater the penalty for apprehension), the more a potential criminal will be motivated to avoid known surveillance areas and move into nearby unsurveilled ones. More cameras.
- to make surveillance less obvious – If a camera can see an offender, the offender can see and avoid the camera, particularly if its presence is “prominently posted.” This will produce an impetus toward the acquisition of smaller, less visible cameras, and toward the use of equipment (including mobile cameras) that can be used less conspicuously/more surreptitiously, e.g., by remote control. Miniaturize technology.
- to enhance the effectiveness of the system by keeping its characteristics secret – There will also be a natural tendency to keep system specifications and characteristics – e.g., camera resolving power, or the existence and content of dossiers – secret and unavailable to the citizenry. More secrecy.
- to initiate live monitoring – According to the UK study, “Control room studies found that only 26 percent of incidents were prompted by outside agencies such as police contacts ... while [live monitors] themselves identified 74 percent of incidents.” Pressure is therefore likely to arise to initiate and then increase live monitoring. Next will come two-way communication between live monitors and patrol officers: “*We rely on the radios, they're our*

eyes and ears really, to find out what's going on. It would be better if we could talk to police on the radio as well. ...We can watch them on the screen missing the right person, because we cannot communicate with them at the time.... Clearly, if an objective of any scheme is to direct police to incidents, then two-way communication is a prerequisite.” More personnel assigned to live monitoring.

In conclusion, in our view continuously recorded public police surveillance represents a profound change in the relationship between government and citizenry in our community. We encourage you to delay your decision until other Town leaders and the public – and you, yourselves – have had time to properly study this proposal, and until Town Meeting has had its say on the matter.