



February 14, 2013

Mayor Mike McGinn
Seattle City Council,
President Sally J. Clark
P.O. Box 94749
Seattle, WA 98124-4749

Dear Mayor McGinn, Council President Clark, and Council Members,

ACLU OF WASHINGTON
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JEAN ROBINSON
BOARD PRESIDENT

KATHLEEN TAYLOR
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The ACLU is writing to express our growing concern with the City of Seattle's practice of accepting federal grants to acquire and implement surveillance programs with no public input and no apparent oversight by elected leaders. The concern has been reinforced by recent revelations of the installation of a broad-scale system of surveillance cameras along Alki Beach and the waterfront, which will be part of a "mesh network" extending to I-5 in the heart of Seattle.

Like the controversial acquisition of two police drones, this program was driven by Department of Homeland Security grant money and was implemented without public discussion. Indeed, when the topic of the surveillance cameras appeared on the agenda of a council meeting, it was referred to only as "port security" without disclosing that it was a plan to install cameras in city neighborhoods. Not only was the public unaware of the scope of the program, but further, civilian leadership had no process for adopting policies or procedures regulating the program prior to its launch. The Police Department received no direction about ways to limit potential privacy violations.

In a democratic society we treasure the ability to move about our streets without being under constant government surveillance. We do not expect our conduct to be monitored and recorded, with the data stored in government files. Police must limit surveillance to targeted efforts responding to specific suspicion of criminal activity or security threats.

The ACLU supports the use of technology that improves policing and keeps us safer. We do not support the use of devices that collect, store and share data about legal behavior and innocent conduct. We expect our city leadership to carefully scrutinize the purchase and use of surveillance devices to ensure that they are necessary to good policing and are controlled to protect the privacy of law-abiding people.

Without clear policies and protections, technology can move us step-by-step toward the creation of a "surveillance society," where government has the unrestricted ability to track where we go, what we do, and with whom we associate.

The Mayor recently showed commendable leadership in acting to cancel Seattle's aerial drone program. The ACLU calls upon the city's elected leaders to now show similar leadership by re-examining the new surveillance camera system.

Beyond that, we call upon the city's elected leaders to establish a public process with public input and full disclosure of plans when the city contemplates acquisition of surveillance technology and implementation of surveillance programs.

The city should only authorize the purchase of such technology after civilian leadership has engaged in public hearings and adopted policies and procedures for use of the surveillance devices.

Sincerely,



Kathleen Taylor
Executive Director

Cc: Seattle City Council
Sally Bagshaw
Tim Burgess
Richard Conlin
Jean Godden
Bruce Harrell
Nick Licata
Mike O'Brien
Tom Rasmussen