

Detroit City Council approves ordinance that authorizes high tech surveillance of the public, including facial recognition

Kevin Reed
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On May 25, the Detroit City Council unanimously adopted an ordinance that officially authorizes the purchase and use of advanced surveillance technologies on the public, including facial recognition systems, by any city department.

Under the misnamed title “Community Input Over Government Surveillance,” the language was first presented on April 14 by the council’s Public Health and Safety Standing Committee, as amendments to Chapter 17 of the 2019 Detroit City Code, and inserted under Article V: Purchase and Supplies.

The ordinance’s 18 pages of technical definitions, procurement procedures, specifications requirements and multiple reporting mechanisms are one big exercise in obfuscation by the Democratic Party-run City Council and its supporters.

First of all, the ordinance does nothing to address public opposition to the existing facial recognition system installed throughout the city in 2017 under the program name Project Greenlight. This surveillance system involves hundreds of video cameras connected 24/7 to a central police monitoring platform that compares face images against “mugshot” and driver’s license photos in real time and can identify an individual within minutes.

Project Greenlight was purchased and installed by Democratic Mayor Mike Duggan, in cooperation with the Detroit Police Department, without any public review or discussion. Last October, when the contract with the provider of the solution was due to expire, a majority of the City Council voted in favor of renewed funding plus upgrades despite vocal opposition from the public to the existence of the system.

Secondly, all claims that the ordinance enables public

input and oversight of surveillance are belied by numerous loopholes that give city officials plenty of room to proceed in whatever manner they please. For example, after going through a lengthy description of the approval process for the city to acquire a new surveillance system—including the submission of Surveillance Technology Specification Reports, public hearings and the issuing of several Annual Surveillance Reports—the ordinance states that the city “may temporarily acquire, or temporarily use, surveillance technology in exigent circumstances without following the provisions of this ordinance.”

The term “exigent circumstances” is used eleven times in the document, but never defined. One particularly ominous clause in this part of the ordinance states that the city “may keep and maintain only data related to the exigent circumstances and dispose of any data that is not relevant to an ongoing investigation.”

Given that the assurances from the federal government that it will not gather data on US citizens have been repeatedly broken, even after the mass surveillance program of the NSA and CIA was exposed by Edward Snowden in 2013, no one can take the promises from the Detroit City Council seriously.

There was never any doubt about the passage of the surveillance ordinance, since it was drafted by Council Pro Tem Mary Sheffield and had the endorsement of Council President Brenda Jones and former Detroit Police Chief James Craig as well as the *Detroit Free Press* and the Detroit ACLU.

In typical Democratic Party fashion Sheffield attempted to palm the right-wing ordinance off as a progressive step forward, saying, “With surveillance technology permeating throughout all facets of our

daily lives, it was important to strike a balance between the added safety it can provide with giving people a voice and injecting transparency into the procurement and use processes.”

In endorsing the measure, the *Free Press* stated in an editorial, “It offers structure for what is likely to be the inevitable, continued use of technology that has broad implications for civil rights and disparate outcomes in policing.”

In other words, the *Free Press* editors know that the use of advanced surveillance technologies violates basic democratic rights, but it is needed in Detroit to suppress the upsurge of working class opposition and protests. As was pointed out by Detroit Will Breathe activists, who were subjected to police violence and unlawful arrests during protests last summer and fall, the Detroit Police Department used extensive video surveillance during the George Floyd demonstrations for the purposes of identifying and attempting to prosecute peaceful protestors.

In supporting the ordinance Eric Williams, Managing Attorney at Economic Equity Practice at Detroit Justice Center & Member of the ACLU Lawyers Committee, was ambivalent, saying, “It does give the public insight into what is happening, which is kind of baseline if we are going to prevent the kind of abuses that are inevitable.”

The content of the reactionary ordinance also came as no surprise since those organizing it based their “opposition” in the previous facial recognition debate upon a thoroughly racist political platform.

In order to maintain a veneer of criticism, the *Free Press* included the following in its editorial, “There’s a long history of using surveillance technology in this country to police Black and brown Americans, dating back to ‘lantern laws’ that required people of color in pre-Revolutionary War New York City to illuminate their faces with a bright light after dark, explained Chad Marlow, senior advocacy and policy counsel at the ACLU. More recently, critics have shown the that the facial recognition technology utilized by many law enforcement agencies does a poor job of matching Black and brown faces.”

The essential argument of the Democrats and their pseudo-left supporters is that police use of facial recognition and electronic surveillance of the public is fine as long as it is regulated with legislation.

The significance of the ordinance passed by the City Council is that, while many cities are banning facial recognition technology or demanding that it be removed, Detroit is among the first cities in the country to officially sanction it. The development of similar legislation at the state and national levels is not far behind.

Video surveillance and facial recognition technologies are being implemented at increasing rates in cities across the US. According to a study by Compritech, there are an average of six cameras per 1,000 people in US cities. Atlanta has the most in the country, with 50 cameras per 1,000 people, and Detroit is seventh on the list, at 13 cameras per 1,000 people.

The Compritech report also stressed that many of the systems now include high resolution cameras and utilization of live streams connected to facial recognition platforms. Exposing the fraud of crime-fighting as the justification for the installation of surveillance systems, the Compritech report states, “there is hardly any correlation between higher camera figures and lower crime indexes. Broadly speaking, then, crime rates aren’t reduced by having more cameras in place.”



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