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Orinda City Council Delays Crime Cam Decision Again

By Laurie Snyder



One example of a fixed-mount Automated License Plate Reader (ALPR) system Photo public domain

system," said Maiorana. Sounding like the retired Contra Costa College football coach he is, he exhorted Orindans to install and then keep burglar alarm systems in good working order. "I've also been burglarized. That burglary happened about 35 years ago, and nothing has ever touched our house again because we have an alarm system."

Conversely, council also heard from frightened residents who have arrived home after work to find windows smashed or doors kicked in. "When I went up to get my mail and saw the guy in a red pickup truck, putting his arm in and taking my mail out and into his truck, I was so shocked that I failed to get the license plate," said Janet Reeves. "He turned and looked at me; he was a Caucasian guy with a round face and sandy hair, and he glared at me and I glared at him." She said police told her they might have caught the suspect had a camera been installed nearby.

"The first time we talked about these cameras after we had a rash of burglaries and the helicopters flying overhead last year, we - at the end of the first meeting - had enough money to buy a camera and one person specifically donated enough money to put a camera on St. Stephens," said Karl Richtenberg. "And we were willing to buy a camera and gift it to the police department - at no cost to you guys. So, I don't think money should be a major concern. If people want to buy cameras for their neighborhoods, I don't see why you shouldn't allow it to happen."

If approved by council, such cameras might be permanently mounted on trees or signposts on public property, or installed initially in one police car or as part of a grouping of cameras that could be moved from one higher crime area to another. License plate photos would then be checked against "hot lists" - databases of felony arrest warrants, registered sex offenders, stolen vehicles or vehicles used during the commission of crimes.

In his report, available on the city's website, Orinda Police Chief Mark Nagel cited several benefits: improved stolen vehicle recovery, accident investigation, clarification of fuzzy witness data and officer safety. The chief also advised council that Lafayette, Piedmont and other cities using this technology are reporting improved arrest and conviction rates.

But a number of Orindans remain concerned about privacy, and a 2013 report by the American Civil Liberties Union may give credence to their fears. In "You Are Being Tracked: How License Plate Readers Are Being Used to Record Americans' Movements," the ACLU cautions that

"The city can only do so much to protect us. We need to protect ourselves." - Vince Maiorana

Citing the old adage that "God helps those who help themselves," Vince Maiorana urged Orinda City Council members at their Jan. 13 meeting not to bow to pressure from residents pushing them to install security cameras across Orinda.

As reported in the Dec. 3 edition of this newspaper, crime is actually down in Orinda. The city had 76 residential burglaries in 2013, but by mid-November 2014, that statistic was halved to 36 - in a city with roughly 6,800 residential units. From Dec. 21, 2014 to Jan. 3, one instance each of residential, auto and commercial burglary, grand theft, and vehicle theft were committed.

"People leave their cars open, and they get burglarized. And what seems to me, when I walk the streets and talk to people about burglaries in their area, invariably they do not have an alarm

"more and more cameras, longer retention periods, and widespread sharing allow law enforcement agents to assemble the individual puzzle pieces of where we have been over time into a single, high-resolution image of our lives. The knowledge that one is subject to constant monitoring can chill the exercise of our cherished rights to free speech and association."

Reminding readers of the 20th century's illegal targeting by federal agencies of civil rights and anti-war activists, the report also states that many police departments nationwide are planning to substantially increase the number of cameras they operate. And it expresses the view that most government agencies are poorly controlling access to and deleting the data of innocent citizens. In comparison to the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department (CCSD) one-year data retention policy, the Ohio State Highway Patrol immediately deletes all non-hit captures. The city of Tiburon deletes "all license plate data after 30 days or less."

After probing Nagel, his CCSD boss and City Attorney Osa Wolff about how the cameras would be maintained and by whom, city indemnification policies and the likely impact of Freedom of Information Act requests on data access, council decided to continue the matter to a third public meeting.



Three Reconyx motion-activated cameras similar to the one pictured here have been operating on the private roads of the Orinda Downs neighborhood since early 2014. According to Orinda Police Chief Mark Nagel, "The only time their association provides photos to the Police Department is when there has been a crime or suspicious activity." Photo provided

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