Seattle
Police Department

Date: September 9, 2025
To: Members of City Council

Council President Sara Nelson
Councilmember Rob Saka
Councilmember Mark Solomon
Councilmember Joy Hollingsworth
Councilmember Maritza Rivera
Councilmember Debora Juarez
Councilmember Dan Strauss
Councilmember Robert Kettle
Councilmember Alexis Mercedes Rinck

From: Chief Shon F. Barnes, Seattle Police
About: RTCC Expansion

Cc: Tim Burgess, Deputy Mayor
Natalie Walton-Anderson, Chief Public Safety Officer
Andrew Myerberg, Chief of Staff
Dan Nolte, Deputy Chief of Staff
Eci Ameh, Executive Director, Community Police Commission
Derrick Wheeler-Smith, Office of Civil Rights

Last Friday, I received letters from the Community Police Commission and the Office of Civil Rights outlining concerns about the City's plan to expand the public space cameras (CCTV)[1] program to three areas: the Capitol Hill Nightlife District, arterial streets near Garfield and Nova High Schools, and the SODO Stadium District.

Given the proximity to Tuesday's vote, and my understanding the Council will discuss possible amendments to the ordinance that came out of the public safety committee Monday afternoon in your briefing session, I want to share my perspective with you.

The Seattle Police Department is committed to advancing strategies that both protect public safety and uphold civil rights and improve recourse for crime victims. As we seek approval to expand the Real-Time Crime Center's use of public space cameras, I want to

[1] Although there is no proposed expansion to ALPR, many of the stated concerns in the CPC and OCR letters are directed at that technology, not the use of public space cameras. As such, I include explanations of the safeguards into RTCC systems generally.

directly address concerns that have been raised and acknowledge the fear that exists in many of our communities about expanded surveillance.

Benjamin Franklin's famous words remind us: *"Those who would give up Essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety."* This principle is foundational. This is precisely why SPD has placed significant safeguards in three critical areas: the intake of video information, internal access to that video information, and any distribution of that video evidence to third parties. For example, SPD's public space cameras are only pointed at public places such as sidewalks, streets, and parks, where privacy interests are significantly lessened. The activities recorded take place in the public spaces, and it is well accepted that the practice of using cameras to promote the public safety of all does not infringe on those liberties – particularly where notice of such use is clearly stated.

At the same time, Real-Time Crime Centers are not new or experimental. They operate in nearly every major city with dense urban environments across the country. In my experience as a criminologist and veteran police chief, these systems improve police efficiency, aid rapid emergency response, and strengthen investigative outcomes.

Community sentiment in Seattle has also shifted. Residents and business owners are increasingly calling for stronger action to address crime and disorder in our city. At the recent Public Safety Committee hearing several Capitol Hill business owners implored the expansion of public space camera. They want clean, safe, and welcoming public spaces. Expanding our CCTV program responds directly to this demand, supporting our broader commitment to restoring civility, security, and confidence in Seattle's public areas.

Seattle has an opportunity to align itself with national best practices and meet the expectations of its residents. Expanding this program is a prudent, transparent, and balanced step forward—one that strengthens public safety while safeguarding liberties and assisting those victimized by crime.

I hear the concerns that have been raised and fully recognize that facts and assurances may not alleviate those concerns. I want to reassure all the people of Seattle that we are here to serve and protect you. That's true regardless of your immigration status (we won't ask) or your need for reproductive healthcare or gender affirming care (that is your business, not ours). Our mission is to serve everyone—residents, workers, students,and visitors—with compassion and procedural justice regardless of who they are or how they identify. SPD is committed to constitutional policing and will never waiver on this position.

The restrictions, limitations, policies, and systems I outline below are important, not because I believe they are perfect, but because we have designed them to address

foreseeable concerns. They are strong guardrails. Even after reviewing the CPC and OCR letters, I am unaware of any circumstance where the federal government has obtained RTCC or ALPR data anywhere in the country without the consent of a police department, [2] a rogue employee, or formal legal process. **We do not consent, have established strict controls to prevent rogue actors, and are prepared to engage in legal processes to defend the data and our community.**

1. ***SPD Limits Gathering and Retention of Video Evidence.***

    a) **All CCTV cameras face public areas, and privacy masks are used to limit visibility into private areas.**

The technology systems are only used in public places such as sidewalks, streets, and parks to mitigate privacy concerns. Permanent privacy masks (they cannot be digitally removed after the fact) protect apartments, private homes, and non-public areas.

    b) **Data is stored for the shortest time period that meets operational needs.**

Although the enabling ordinance permits retention of CCTV data for up to 30 days, SPD limits local storage retention to five days. Video evidence is moved from the camera's local storage to Evidence.com when it is needed for an investigation and is then subject to the retention schedule for that investigation. This means that outside of specific known cases, data is not available after five days. The vast majority – over 95% - of video records are deleted with only those clips associated with an investigation and case being retained.

ALPR data are stored for 90 days – a period deemed necessary for investigations. However, as outlined in the enabling ordinance, public disclosure requests are fulfilled without disclosing "in a manner that links a license plate to a time, date, or location, unless required to do so by court order or applicable law."[3]

    c) **The use of public space cameras is typically triggered by an emergency call for service.**

Our cameras are not continuously monitored. Professional staff within SPD do not sit and observe cameras passively. They are accessed in response to a reported incident of crime

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[2] For example, the Metropolitan Police Department has had federal partners embedded in their RTCC since its inception – there was no "takeover" of the system. Whether it is being used for illegitimate purposes is unclear from the available article and would depend on what MPD allows. However, the federal involvement in MPD's RTCC was voluntary and SPD has no such integration with our federal partners.

[3] Ordinance 127044

or an emergent public safety threat. This targeted and restrained approach ensures the technology is used responsibly while giving officers the ability to act quickly and effectively.

2. SPD Restricts Access to the Data and Information in RTCC Systems.

a) SPD strictly limits access to RTCC systems

There are only 28 people who have access to FUSUS[4], the primary software supporting RTCC and its camera feeds. Of those, four are ITD employees, twenty-three are RTCC analysts and video specialists, and one is a sworn member of the service – Captain Jim Britt, who manages the RTCC. All 28 people have been backgrounded and have obtained CJIS certification.

There are only 42 people citywide with access to ***search*** the historical ALPR records. The largest user group comprises 14 OIG personnel. In addition, 13 SPD Intel investigators, nine RTCC analysts, four system administrators, and one ITD employee have access. All 42 people have been backgrounded and have obtained CJIS certification.

Specifically addressing concerns about the Seattle Fusion Center, the one sergeant assigned there does not have access to FUSUS/CCTV/or ALPR. Even if that sergeant wanted to share our data, he could not. That said, I have full confidence that the sergeant will follow the laws and SPD policies discussed below.

b) All activities in RTCC systems are logged and subject to audit and review.

Every user of the system has an account, further limited by role, which tracks all activity in the system.

The OIG will independently audit as part of its routine work on surveillance systems and has also hired independent academic experts to evaluate the RTCC and its systems, with the evaluation team led by researchers from the University of Pennsylvania's Crime and Justice Policy Lab.

The RTCC was approved as a two-year research project. Data is being collected for operational information, use, and investigation outcomes, and provided to researchers for independent evaluation.

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[4] We are aware of quotes attributed to a Seattle employee that the City of Seattle was “duped” because an Atlanta Assistant Chief allegedly violated ethics laws and promoted FUSUS while sitting on the board of that company. While SPD did have communication with that Assistant Chief and was unaware of conflicts of interest, he did not materially impact SPD’s decision-making. In conjunction with ITD, SPD thoroughly vetted four different companies and stand by our choice.

The three areas proposed for expansion also provide different environments to evaluate. Capitol Hill provides a dense active restaurant and nightlife corridor, and dense traffic and pedestrian patterns. Garfield/Nova High School area provides traffic issues in and around schools. The SODO stadium area provides large event, parking, and crowd management. All three of these areas create an opportunity for victimization and disorder, providing additional research opportunities. These three areas will be part of the external evaluation.

c) All searches of ALPR require that the SPD case number and a statement of reasonable suspicion or probable cause be logged

Along with limiting access to ALPR data, employees must enter the associated SPD case number as well as a brief statement of probable cause or reasonable suspicion for the vehicle and its involvement in a crime. For example, a new search would show "2025-123456, Burglary, Witnesses reported seeing the suspects flee the scene in the described vehicle." That way, an audit by OIG would be able to independently justify each search.

***3. SPD Restricts Sharing of the Data and Information in RTCC Systems*.**

a) SPD does not share its data outside of an active criminal investigation.

Many police departments share data with third-party aggregators and receive ALPR information from other departments. SPD does not.

SPD may share information with other local law enforcement partners in the course of an active *criminal* investigation; however, as outlined below, SPD does not participate in immigration enforcement of any kind.

As noted above, the concerns about the Washington State Fusion Center are misplaced. No employee at that center has access to any RTCC system.

b) Contract language for all RTCC systems (and Body Worn Camera and In-Car Video) was modified to ensure that the vendor could not release the City's data.

Section 4 of the enabling ordinance for RTCC requested that SPD include language to address data sharing in the contract with Axon generally, but also specifically relating to reproductive healthcare and gender affirming care; SPD did so and proactively added immigration to the contract language. It reads as follows:

> ***Notices*** *The Contractor shall notify SPD if the Contractor receives a warrant or subpoena seeking SPD data for any purpose, including purposes related to immigration status, reproductive healthcare, or gender affirming medical services, unless prohibited by operation of*

law in which case, the Contractor will notify SPD about the warrant or subpoena and action taken when that prohibition is lifted; and, the Contractor shall retain or use in-house legal counsel to object to any warrant or subpoena on the grounds that Contractor does not have possession, custody or control over SPD evidence.

c) Disclosure for immigration enforcement purposes is prohibited by law and policy.

RCW 10.93.160, enacted in 2019 pursuant to the Keep Washington Working Act, establishes for state and local law enforcement agencies strict and blanket prohibitions against inquiring into, collecting, or disseminating information concerning, or cooperating with any federal agency regarding any individual's immigration or citizenship status except as may be required by superseding state or federal law. Expressly included among these restrictions are prohibitions against sharing, providing, or disclosing personal information about any person to anyone engaged, or intending to engage, in immigration enforcement, absent a court order or judicial warrant requiring disclosure. RCW 10.93.160 aligns in full with Seattle's long-standing restrictions against the same (SMC Chapter 4.18), and Seattle Police Department policy 6.020, which likewise predates the state law.

In conclusion, the areas recommended for expansion of CCTV cameras were selected after analysis that showed either the presence of gun violence, persistent felony crime, or human trafficking. Restricting the installation of the cameras will hinder our ability to deter these crimes and protect the people in these areas

While I understand and share feelings and concerns about federal intervention in our city due to unprecedented actions at the national level, my obligation—and the obligation of every member of the SPD—is to prevent crime, hold offenders accountable, and keep our neighborhoods safe. The trust of our communities is essential and SPD has worked to gain and regain that trust and will continue do so. We should not sacrifice the safety of our communities because of the current mistrust of our federal government – we must find the right balance.

SPD restricts access to cameras and does not proactively provide information. SPD does not care who you love, how you got here, or how you legally use public space. SPD does care about the safety of everyone using public space.