

Seattle keeps city surveillance in check

Gemma Alexander

Once a cherished American value, [privacy](#) seems to be a dying concept today, a victim of the [conveniences](#) and [capabilities](#) of new technology. From the federal government down to individual retailers, public and private agencies are using increasingly powerful surveillance technologies without public input or oversight. But at least one American city is drawing a line to protect citizens' [civil rights](#). Seattle recently passed the strongest regulations for surveillance technologies of any local government in the nation.

Background

In 2013, the Seattle city council passed an [ordinance](#) in response to citizens' concerns over the city's acquisition of drones and its installation of video cameras in public spaces downtown and along the waterfront. The new law required council approval for city departments to purchase surveillance equipment.

Three years later, the Seattle police department shadily [purchased social media monitoring tools Geofeedia and Babel Street](#). These acquisitions sparked concerns that the existing legislation, which was limited to specific equipment, was inadequate to address the rapidly evolving landscape of surveillance technology.

New law

Councilmember M. Lorena González, chair of the Gender Equity, Safe Communities and New Americans Committee, sponsored replacement [legislation](#) that expands the definition of surveillance equipment to include software programs or hosted software services. After four committee hearings and eight months of public involvement—during which the council worked with the ACLU of Washington, the mayor's office, the city's IT department, and the police department—the council unanimously [approved](#) new legislation superseding the previous regulations.

In addition to expanding the definition of surveillance technology, the new law requires city departments to conduct community outreach prior to the council's consideration of the request to purchase surveillance technology, to ensure the public is aware and informed of the city's uses of surveillance technology. The council will also be advised by a community advisory group in its decision making.

Future surveillance

The ACLU of Washington [celebrated](#) the aggressive new law, but emphasized the importance of the council's exercise of its oversight role under the new ordinance. While lauding the gains made in the current legislation, the ACLU recommends that Seattle continue to pioneer privacy protections in the digital age by passing further legislation to regulate the type and use of data obtained by municipal surveillance.