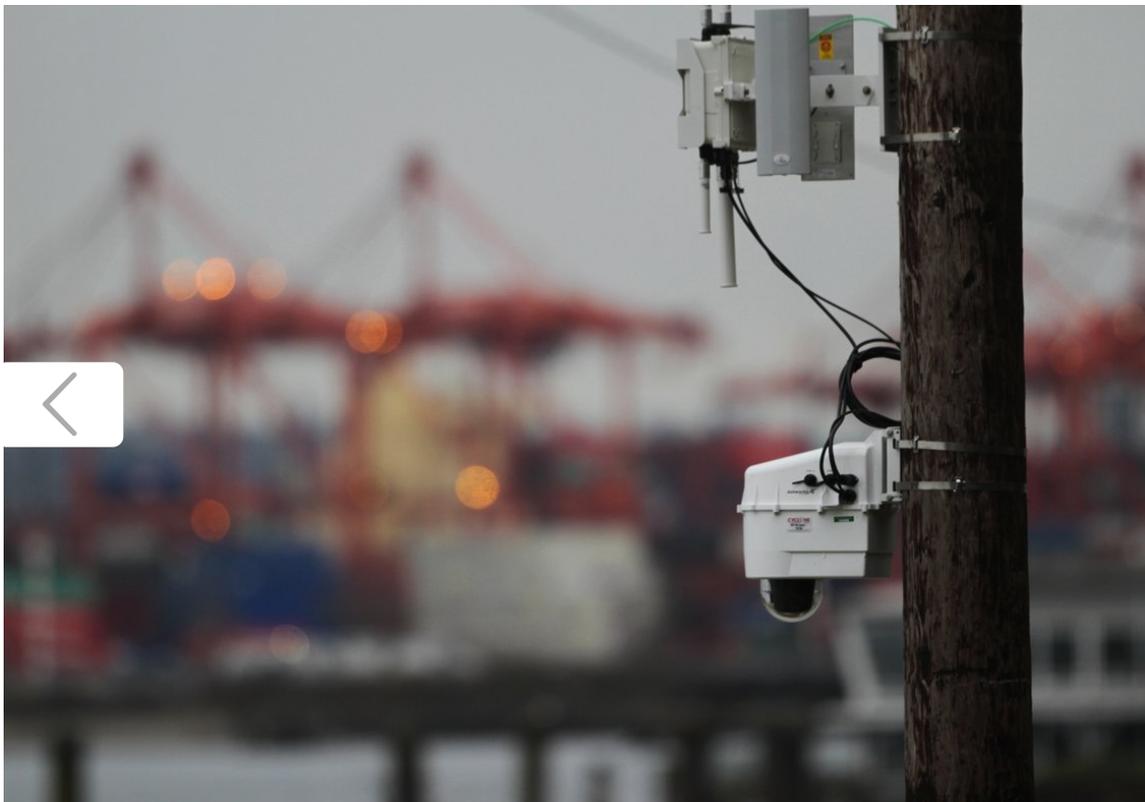


Local News

Surveillance system or public-safety tool? Seattle dismantles controversial wireless mesh network



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1 of 4 Seattle, Wa. February 20, 2013. Though not yet operational, the recently installed waterfront surveillance cameras in West Seattle are positioned at about the height of a third... (Mark Harrison/The Seattle Times) **More**



In 2013, Seattle police installed surveillance cameras and a network that could track wireless devices throughout downtown – after unwanted publicity, they turned it off. Now the city is paying \$150,000 to physically tear it down.

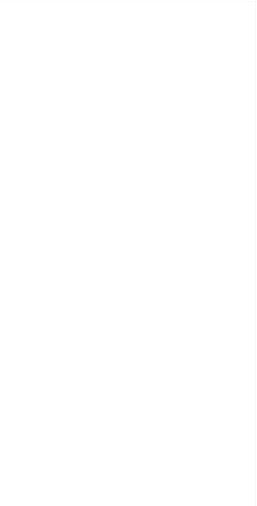
By [Brendan Kiley](#)

Seattle Times staff reporter

Seattle's wireless mesh network, a node of controversy about police surveillance and

the role of federal funding in city policing, is coming down.

Megan Erb, spokeswoman for Seattle Information Technology, said the city has budgeted \$150,000 for contractor Prime Electric and city employees to remove dozens of surveillance cameras and 158 “wireless access points” — little, off-white boxes with antennae mounted on utility poles around the city.



When the mesh network was bought and installed in 2013, with \$3.6 million from the Department of Homeland Security, the Seattle Police Department (SPD) said it would be a valuable public-safety device for port security and first-responder communication during emergencies. Critics from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Washington argued it was an apparatus for state surveillance hiding behind a public-safety smile.

Either way, it took the Seattle City Council by surprise.

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The mesh network, according to the [ACLU](#), [news reports](#) and [anti-surveillance activists from Seattle Privacy Coalition](#), had the potential to track and log every wireless device that moved through its system: people attending protests, people getting cups of coffee, people going to a hotel in the middle of the workday.

In November 2013, shortly after the news stories about it came out, [SPD spokesman Sean Whitcomb announced](#): “The wireless mesh network will be deactivated until city council approves a draft (privacy) policy and until there’s an opportunity

for vigorous public debate.”

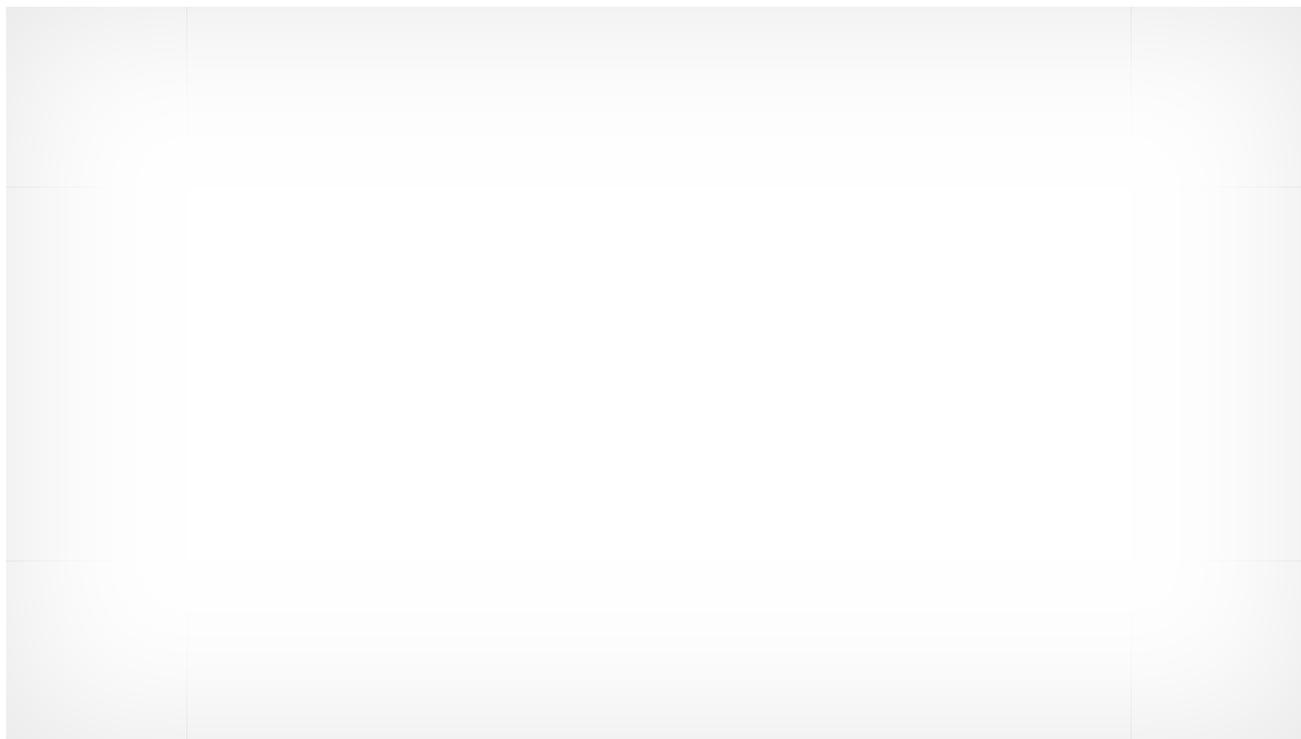
That policy never materialized. Now crews are tearing its hardware down and repurposing the usable parts for other city agencies, including Seattle Department of Transportation traffic cameras.

Erb said the city had hoped to remove the hardware earlier, but couldn't because of work-schedule delays. “Seattle City Light is eager for us to remove old equipment from their poles,” she added, “so others, including possibly commercial cellular carriers, can upgrade their equipment.”

SPD declined several times to discuss the removal of the network.

“This is one good, granular victory,” said Shankar Narayan, Washington state's technology and liberty director of the ACLU. “It's an issue we'd advocated around for a very long time. We have a longstanding principle that suspicionless surveillance of general populations is not useful and chills people's constitutionally protected rights.”

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When the mesh-network debate first erupted in 2013, [SPD spokesman Jonah Spangenthal-Lee wrote on the department's blotter](#) that the system “can and will be used a number of ways by a variety of different agencies.”

That versatility turned out to be a public-relations bug, instead of a feature.

Digital networks with surveillance potential, Narayan said, have a cost: “Not just in terms of public dollars, but community trust, willingness to attend a protest — we know that people who know they’re being watched will act differently. We’re glad to see the mesh network taken away.”

This isn’t the first time SPD has been pressured to abandon a Homeland Security-funded tool. In 2013, it [gave up its drones](#). Like the mesh network, they were quietly bought with federal money and became a flashpoint for public outcry.

“We live in a brave new world where data and algorithms can be used against you without transparency,” Narayan said. “We don’t know who collected data, sold it to a data packager, then sold it, for example, to an HMO that will raise your health-insurance premium based on your reckless driving.”

The life cycles of the drones and the mesh network, Seattle City Council President Bruce Harrell said, have been a learning experience for Seattle.

SPD “needed to respect the public process, explain the technology to the public in a transparent manner, listen to the public’s concerns and obtain council approval via ordinance prior to installation.”

In 2013, the city council passed a surveillance ordinance giving it more oversight in the acquisition of devices with surveillance capabilities.

Last year, that ordinance was amended and bulked up, requiring city departments to report their surveillance-enabled technologies already in use and present them for review by the council.

To date, city departments have identified 28 technologies — from Seattle Department of Transportation’s license-plate readers to SPD tools like iBase, a “crime analysis tool allows for configuring, capturing, controlling, analyzing and displaying complex information and relationships in link and entity data.”

So what, exactly, does that do?

“That’s the point,” Narayan said with a chuckle. “All we have now are vague descriptions — it could be anything from a simple graphic representation of a spreadsheet to a complex analytic tool that establishes relationships to show that somebody might be a gang member.”

The council’s scrutiny of the city’s surveillance tools, Narayan said, will probably

begin in March.

In the aftermath of the drones and mesh-network controversies, he added, the ACLU has had productive conversations with SPD: “They have a better understanding that if they want to roll out these technologies, they will have to be ready to answer tough questions.”

Removal of the mesh network is “a clear win for privacy,” said Phil Mocek, co-founder of Seattle Privacy Coalition. “Hopefully, this move is indication that city leaders have learned their lesson and that we will continue to see increased sanctuary from unwarranted surveillance in Seattle.”

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