

FLOCK SYSTEMS PROPOSAL REVIEW BY MCCE HOA BOARD

The intent of this talking point position paper is to summarize the MCCE HOA Board actions to not proceed with a Flock tag Reader System. This Flock option has been voted down by HOA Board to two separate occasions.

Background and Reference

Flock's pitch to HOAs and neighborhood management companies goes like this: For a little more than a thousand dollars per camera, their technology can capture evidence that police need to solve crimes, especially difficult cases like thefts and break-ins with very few leads. The data becomes the property of the HOA, which can grant access to the information to anyone they'd like.

Flock cameras capture time-stamped still images of each vehicle that enters the frame, and the system uses a type of artificial intelligence to decipher the license plate and other identifying information. Users, designated by the HOA, can then search the database for specific entries and download them one by one.

On the surface, it appears as though a simple fix—installing relatively discrete license-plate readers—had an enormous positive impact. That's the narrative Flock Safety has put forward. The company proudly touted the results of the Cobb County pilot in a press release it sent to WIRED this week, and advertises on its website that it solves "up to five crimes an hour." It should be noted Flock Tag Reader Systems donated over \$350,000 of cameras in an attempt to get a favorable review from Cobb County.

Installing Flock Camera Systems for free for law enforcement departments country wide has been a marketing ploy for Flock systems. They have given away millions of dollars of cameras a system, expecting a favorable review in return. The company makes up their difference on the back end by charging HOA communities' full price, preying on suburban resident's fear of crime whether it exists or not in that area.

Expert Options

But experts say it's not that simple, and that establishing a causal relationship between any given variable and fluctuating crime rates is no easy task. "I am not saying that the readers did not have an effect on crime—it is just that we cannot attribute any reduction in crime to the readers themselves," says Alex Piquero, a professor of criminology at the University of Texas, Dallas.

A number of states do have laws banning automated license plate readers even in the hands of private owners, including Arkansas and Maine.

National Examples of Opinion

Durham North Carolina: Days after Chief C.J. Davis signed the memorandum of understanding with Flock, Davis was wary when the company wanted a quote for its press release heralding Durham Police as the 50th such agreement with police across the country.

Davis eventually responded with a quote about a week later, noting the department was "appreciative of the partnership" with Flock. The city received \$150,000 + in free cameras and services.

"We recognize there is a First Amendment right to photograph things that are going on in public," said Ann Webb, policy counsel for ACLU North Carolina. "But our concern is really when it starts to overlap with government use of that information and creates what we would consider a slippery slope toward a surveillance state."

Lincoln, Nebraska: Last month, the police chief of Lincoln, Nebraska announced that the security cameras watching over the city's downtown bar scene have not proven effective in his department's efforts to stem criminal activity. Police Chief Jim Peschong said that the recordings hadn't helped investigators either identify new suspects or bolster evidence against current ones. Peschong also stated that the cameras hadn't lowered crime in their vicinity: according to Lincoln Police statistics, there were 128 assaults within 500 feet of the cameras last year, numbers that are on par with the department's five-year average.

There are two important points to be made regarding this announcement. First, it followed a trend of government officials acknowledging the ineffectiveness of some surveillance tools. These announcements often fly under the radar, but it's worth noting that even the greatest proponents of mass surveillance occasionally admit to its shortcomings.

Between 2018 and 2020, similar evaluations of surveillance cameras' effect on law enforcement statistics were conducted in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Baltimore, Chicago, and Washington. Most of these reports reached the same conclusions as Lincoln's. Only Baltimore cameras reportedly had a positive impact on the levels of crime, though the writers of that report also noted that the significant costs associated with the cameras were a deterrent to their continued use.

Cobb County Georgia: Wider trends too have to be taken into account. Police say crime is down overall in Cobb County, as well as in nearby Atlanta. "We do believe that there are other things we are doing that have attributed to the general decline in crime," says VanHoozer. He notes there are also social factors that might be contributing to the drop, like low unemployment.

Even police agree. “To make it very clear, we are not 100 percent positive that Flock cameras were the difference,” notes VanHoozer. Cobb County received over \$350,000 of cameras and services free.

Expert Comments and Conclusion

The overall effect installing license plate readers has on crime rates still isn't clear, and likely can't be determined by conducting a short experiment. Some studies indicate the readers don't deter crime, while others have found the devices can potentially reduce certain types of offenses.

Maria Cuellar, a professor of criminology at the University of Pennsylvania who researches the use of statistics in the law, says pilots like the one in Cobb County only provide before and after comparisons, which alone can't prove a causal relationship. “The problem with these is that so many things could have changed between the ‘before’ period and the ‘after’ period,” she adds. That includes everything from the number of cars passing through the area to broader demographic changes. The study was also relatively short. “With such a small sample size in terms of time, any changes could likely be noise rather than an actual signal,” says Cuellar.

As license plate readers are installed in more communities, citizens will need to weigh the potential privacy risks against the promise they will reduce crime in their neighborhood. They should also keep in mind that a whole host of things can impact crime rates, and while surveillance technology is an increasingly common variable, it's not the only one.

Marietta Country Club Estate HOA Board Review and Recommendations

History of Mischief in the Sub-Division

- Relative few crimes or mischief in the past 10 years
- 3 home break-ins in late 2014
 - One person caught and put in jail
 - Two specific time break-ins in unlocked doors
- 3 break-ins in over 10 years is not a crime wave

- Sign mischief with stop sign and street sign
- Two mail boxes mail tampered with

The Previous Board Actions

- Worked jointly with Cobb County Police for frequent pass-through visits
- Reviewed three different camera options at entrance of subdivision, including jointly with Marietta Country Club. The board voted to not pursue due to high costs to the residents, limited return on the investment
- The HOA has a fiduciary responsibility to the homeowners to be good stewards of the resident's money
- We are given proxy to make good decisions that impact fair and equitable to all residents

Cobb County Police Recommendations

- Residents should consider implementing a home security camera system.
 - If a person wants to break-in to your home, they are likely to do it.
 - Statistics prove that break-in persons want the easiest way to enter a home. Many times, they move to homes with no home security system for easier target, usually bypassing those homes with security systems

- There are many companies in the area supplying home security cameras at varying costs
- The monthly monitoring fee is typically \$12 to \$20.
- The Mail Boss security locking mailbox can provide security for your incoming mail
- No USPS approved locking mailbox protects your outgoing mail

Return on Investment

- Since there are only five incidents in a 10-year period
- There is limited need to spend \$4000 per year on Flock System
- There is no guarantee that license readers would solve any of our low incidents
- The winner in this is Flock Systems, they get \$4000 of our money

Impact on HOA Budget

- As you can see, the 2020 budget with the Flock System expense goes **negative -\$3350.00**
- If an HOA budget goes negative, you can assume the next actions, increase in dues likely

Flock Systems

- Maybe a good option for a high crime area
- We are not a high crime area

- \$4000 per year puts our budget into negative territory
- Tag cameras by themselves are great for catching speeders or toll booth runners, but how exactly are you going to prove in court that this particular car/plate was 100% positively involved in the robbery or mischiefs 2 streets over?
- Its site makes a handful of dubious claims
 - Crime can increase by 35% in summer months
 - 70 % of crimes involve a vehicle
- Flock may very well make bajillions of dollars, but it won't be by preventing or solving crimes. It will be through capitalizing off consumers' pettiness and fears, all the while perpetuating the prejudices that inform them.
- Flock Safety looks to capitalize on Suburban fear
- Their product is taking advantage of society's discomfort with property crimes

Cobb County Recommendations for keeping Residents safe

- 1. Make Sure Neighbors Know Your Name**
- 2. Keep a Close-Knit Community**
- 3. Maintain Clean Landscaping**
- 4. Maintain Smart Lighting**
- 5. See Something, Say Something**
- 6. Maintain your Community's Relationship with Local Police**
- 7. Maintain an active Neighborhood watch group of residents**

