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Atherton: Council approves installing 16 new license plate readers

Town also takes step forward with financing civic center project

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by Angela Swartz / Almanac

Atherton will pursue private bonds to fund its new civic center project after a town consultant advised the City Council that public markets are proving volatile as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Council members also gave the go-ahead to purchase additional license plate readers to install throughout town to deter crime during a virtual council meeting on Wednesday, May 6.

Town officials had always considered a public sale option for purchasing "certificates of participation" (COPs) to fund the long-awaited \$31.6 million civic center revamp, slated for completion in 2021, until COVID-19 hit, said Wing-See Fox, a managing director for town consultant UrbanFutures at the meeting. (Without an influx of cash, the general fund balance is projected to be at negative \$1.9 million by October.)

The council gave UrbanFutures permission to authorize a term sheet with Capital One to use COPs to take out [between \\$7 million and \\$9 million](#) over 10 years at a 2.2% interest rate during the meeting. Fox said the term sheet creates a mutual understanding that the town will move forward with Capital One. Just three of 20 banks the town's consultant contacted about COPs responded because the banks are busy with an influx of loan requests as a result of COVID-19, Fox said.

"Starting in mid-March, in the municipal market, no bonds were getting sold; at that point we decided to seriously pursue and consider a private placement option," Fox said. Private placement financing comes through a bank, while a public sale offers bonds to the general public, according to [a report prepared](#) by staff for the meeting.

Bob Polito, a member of the town's Audit and Finance Committee, told the council that private placement makes the most sense for the town right now.

"If we were to postpone this, we might go out to 20 banks (later) and get nobody interested," he said. "With a public sale you're taking some risk and you don't really know what you're going to get. It's a no-brainer to take what's at hand."

Vice Mayor Elizabeth Lewis said the private financing route makes a lot of sense given "all the uncertainties in the public market and the world."

The civic center project includes police and administration facilities, building and planning offices, and a library. Construction, which began [in April 2019](#), was on hold for weeks during San Mateo County's shelter-in-place order, but modifications to the order allowed for it to resume.


On May 20, the council will vote to officially authorize issuing the COPs to Capital One, Fox said.

License plate readers



Proposed locations for additional license plate readers in Atherton. Courtesy town of Atherton




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During the meeting, the council also approved buying 16 [Flock Safety](#) automated license plate readers, known as ALPRs, for a cost of \$2,000 each, totaling \$32,000 per year starting in the 2020-21 fiscal year, which begins July 1. Four will be installed on Middlefield Road; four on Alameda de Las Pulgas; two on Valparaiso Avenue; one on Marsh Road; two on Atherton Avenue; two on Selby Lane; and one at Ringwood Avenue and Bay Road, according to [a report prepared](#) by staff for the meeting.

The council also approved purchasing eight signs, costing \$1,200 total, that inform people there are license plate readers installed. They will be placed at, or near, the main entrances to town.

"I think it gives us eyes where we want them," said Mayor Rick DeGolia. "It also gives us a significant number of notices that will act as a real deterrent. ... I want to make sure we don't spend too much time on too many cameras; I'm not sure how it will impact officers' time in monitoring (them)."

Police first proposed the idea to install cameras in town in response to a rash of [20 residential burglaries over a four-month period](#) between November 2018 and February 2019.

Town police tested two Flock automated license plate readers in Holbrook-Palmer Park [earlier this year](#). (ALPRs are mounted on police cars or on fixtures such as road signs and bridges. There were already public safety cameras at Holbrook-Palmer Park, and new police vehicles are equipped with ALPR cameras as part of their existing dashboard cameras.)

The cameras in the park have proven to be a "valuable investigative tool," the staff report states.

"Staff believes that Flock ALPR cameras placed at strategic locations around Town will add a significant investigative option that will help solve/deter crime in Atherton's neighborhoods," staff said. "Placing ALPR cameras along the Atherton borders will provide law enforcement investigators with a pointer system that can help to identify vehicles associated with suspects, witnesses, or victims, and to develop exculpatory information that assists them with focusing their investigative resources. The data also allows law enforcement to connect serial criminal activities that may have occurred in disconnected law enforcement jurisdictions."

Council member Mike Lempres said there is utility to the cameras, but stressed that he wants to make sure people's privacy is protected.

"I worry a lot about the civil liberties side of this," he said. "You put these up and people's reasonable expectation of privacy goes down." An audit of the cameras' usage is important, he said.

Police Chief Steven McCulley said there will be an independent audit done once a year, but he doesn't know which entity will conduct this audit yet.

Lewis also noted that she is a "little nervous" the town will be the first entity in the county to work with Flock. Flock is an Atlanta-based company that offers security systems for neighborhoods to help police solve crimes.

"I will cross my fingers they (Flock) do have their tech up and running and in good shape," she said.

McCulley noted that license plate readers mounted to police cars in town have proven to be less effective, pulling few valid hits on plates they read.

In addition to the 16 ALPR cameras located along the Atherton borders, staff members believe that more cameras in and around backstreets will further increase the chances of identifying a vehicle used in the commission of a crime.

Staff is seeking to work with residents or neighborhood groups who might be interested in funding additional camera installations. Lindenwood and Lloyd Park neighborhood residents have expressed interest in this proposed collaborative, staff said.

Timing for installing the cameras is still up in the air, according to City Manager George Rodericks.

"We don't have a good idea yet on when they would be installed since install(ation) depends on a number of factors (power, solar, location permission, visibility, view, etc.)," Rodericks said in an email. "It is anticipated that they would all be installed by the end of the calendar year."

After about a year, staff will reassess and determine if additional cameras are needed, the staff report states.

The full meeting can be viewed [here](#).

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Comments

Posted by **whatever** + 6 people like this
 a resident of Menlo Park: Central Menlo Park
 on May 8, 2020 at 6:46 pm

Welcome to 1984 or should we say the paranoid police state. I take it the readers won't be installed on ECR. They shouldn't be installed on Valparaiso as that will be hundreds of vehicles a day who are not entering Atherton. Same goes for the Alameda. If so the town could be in for some major lawsuits.

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Posted by **Menlo Voter.** + 9 people like this
 a resident of Menlo Park: other
 on May 8, 2020 at 7:52 pm

whatever:

what kind of lawsuits? No one has any expectation of privacy while in public.

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Posted by **Whatever** + 4 people like this
 a resident of Menlo Park: Central Menlo Park
 on May 8, 2020 at 8:08 pm

Menlo voter

Atherton is doing this to track people coming into Atherton. However by capturing those plates not going into Atherton they are going beyond their jurisdiction and council justification. Check people sue for everything and Atherton will have to pay for defending cases that arise.

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Posted by **Peter Carpenter** + 8 people like this
 a resident of Menlo Park: Park Forest
 on May 8, 2020 at 8:13 pm

As Menlo Voter states an individual operating a vehicle with legally required license plates has ZERO legal expectations of privacy.

Ask FasTrak which routinely monitors every vehicle going through its toll booths and then sends bills to anyone who is not registered in their toll system. No one has every successfully sued FasTrak.

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Posted by **Liability** + 10 people like this
 a resident of Atherton: other
 on May 8, 2020 at 8:36 pm

But what's going to happen when someone on the APD abuses the information collected?

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Posted by **Peter Carpenter** + 7 people like this
 a resident of Menlo Park: Park Forest
 on May 8, 2020 at 8:40 pm

APD has long had access to confidential DMV information and has always behaved in a responsible manner.

Why do you assume that APD won't act responsibly?

When did you stop speeding and running stop signs?

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Posted by **Liability** + 42 people like this
a resident of Atherton: other
on May 8, 2020 at 11:27 pm

You are assuming my comment meant the APD would abuse this information more so than any other group of human beings.

"APD has long had access to confidential DMV information and has always behaved in a responsible manner."

A search of Almanac back issues will show you this – unfortunately – is far from the case. Just one example was running criminal background checks for guys Councilwoman Didi Fisher's daughter was dating (there was an Almanac article about this one). Coincidentally, she was a big APD supporter, right up to making sure Taj Mahal got built (and then leaving town).

Another Atherton cop used the DMV database to look up a guy his ex was dating (late 90s, and the Almanac wrote up this one also). There are other examples, including but not limited to ones I'm sure were never caught and written about.

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Posted by **good cop, bad cop** + 27 people like this
a resident of Atherton: Lindenwood
on May 9, 2020 at 8:57 am

> and has always behaved in a responsible manner

Ya wanna amend that?

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Posted by **NotDumb** + 10 people like this
a resident of Menlo-Atherton High School
on May 9, 2020 at 5:50 pm

The private company demanding ongoing fees for these cameras maintains the database and can and will have lousy security. Because they're not liable for any loss. Assume these cameras are public. Everything they record will be indexed and fully available to anyone with a little knowlwdge of where to look... no matter what they claim. PIs and Stalkers love places who install these. As do serious criminals instead of the moronic burglary types.

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Posted by **Peter Carpenter** + 4 people like this
a resident of Menlo Park: Park Forest
on May 9, 2020 at 7:26 pm

I will gladly trust Chief McCulley to ensure the integrity of the LPR system.

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Posted by **Whatever** + 4 people like this
a resident of Menlo Park: Central Menlo Park
on May 9, 2020 at 8:09 pm

"gladly trust chief to ensure integrity of the LPR system"

Well it's hard to imagine the chief doing worse than Trump ensuring the integrity of the Covid 19 pandemic response.

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Posted by **Robert Conin** + 8 people like this
a resident of Menlo Park: The Willows
on May 11, 2020 at 12:26 pm

How will Atherton keep tabs on the criminal bicycle element? They don't have license plates.

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Posted by **Peter Carpenter**

+ 3 people like this

a resident of Menlo Park: Park Forest
on May 11, 2020 at 1:22 pm

Given the small number of criminal activities committed in Atherton by bicyclists this is not a problem.

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Posted by **Bob**

+ 5 people like this

a resident of Portola Valley: Brookside Park
on May 11, 2020 at 3:03 pm

FYI: Portola Valley has had these for over two years and has had, to my knowledge, no complaints nor any sign of abuse.

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Posted by **Jeff Healy**

+ 5 people like this

a resident of Atherton: West Atherton
on May 11, 2020 at 3:31 pm

People, forget about any expectation of privacy in public locations. There are security cameras everywhere, including hundreds installed by Atherton residents. Most are high definition and can be used to read license plates and identify pedestrians if the cameras are facing the street. The APD is working to protect residents, not spy on them or those driving through town. I'm glad they are doing this, and I have zero worry about my tax dollars being used to defend lawsuits from people who don't like license plate readers.

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Posted by **RanchGal**

+ 4 people like this

a resident of Atherton: West Atherton
on May 11, 2020 at 4:43 pm

Bring on the cameras. Should have had them years ago. Even if it's just a deterrent.

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Posted by **good cop, bad cop**

+ 4 people like this

a resident of Atherton: Lindenwood
on May 11, 2020 at 5:45 pm

> Portola Valley has had these for over two years and has had, to my knowledge, no complaints nor any sign of abuse.

Nor any documented success. Have they released 'down time' statistics or any other measurable data?

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Posted by **Portola Valley's Experience**

+ Like this comment

a resident of Atherton: other
on May 11, 2020 at 9:47 pm

@good cop

Here's PV's burglary crime stats for the last 10 years.

[Web Link](#)

2019 - 7 burglaries
2018 - 11

2017 - 7
 2016 - 18
 2015 - 9
 2014 - 29
 2013 - 33
 2012 - 9
 2011 - 14
 2010 - 16


PV's cameras came online in early 2018.

2 of the 18 burglaries in 2016 were armed home invasions, which was the major reason PV pursued ALPRs. Since then, there have been no armed home invasions.

2018 and 2019 marked the lowest 2 year total for burglaries in the last 10 years.

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Posted by **good cop, bad cop**
 a resident of Atherton: Lindenwood
 16 hours ago

 Like this comment


Kudos to PV for putting all their info in one place (Atherton doesn't, at least as I can find.)

Looking at PV in 2016, seems they could have parked a cruiser on 2 blocks and cut the incidents by a third (Golden Oak and Portola.)

I can't find the stats, but Atherton has seen a similar rate, over ten years, with the one 'rash' noted above. I'll look later.

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Posted by **Citizen Data**
 a resident of Atherton: other
 15 hours ago


 Like this comment

Citizen RIMS:

A link off of the Town's main website - [Web Link](#)

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Posted by **Liability**
 a resident of Atherton: other
 12 hours ago

 Like this comment

Jeff Healy says "The APD is working to protect residents, not spy on them or those driving through town."

I agree. I don't think this is a plot by the APD to spy on residents or misuse the cameras. Whether or not they prove effective, I believe the intention is to reduce crime.

Regarding the potential to abuse the cameras, which has historical basis to be realized, there was one simple fix that could have accompanied the policy that would have vastly reduced this possibility: complaints about how the police department or individual officers use this information would go to directly to the city council or a citizen sub-committee rather than be self-adjudicated by the police department itself.

This has come up before, in the more general sense of oversight of police complaints, and led to a frenzy of accusations by the police and their supporters of wrongfully placed mistrust, anti police sentiments, hobbling the department's ability to fight crime, etc. That's all ridiculous. Checks/balances/oversight is a good (and in fact essential) thing for any group, especially one entrusted to deal with the public, and can only strengthen the performance of that institution as well as the service the public receives.

Because the town council has refused to consider this for the police department, these complaints and fears will continue to be bubbling at the surface.

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Posted by **Tecsi**

2 people like this

a resident of another community
11 hours ago

A couple questions:

- how will this system address stolen car or stolen plates? Will it determine in real-time stolen status and then immediately apprehend the car?
- similar to above, how will these cameras handle covered over license plates, either with "new car" plates, or with fake license numbers? This seems like a fairly easy, quick thing for burglars to implement. So plates would need to be connected to car year/model and any disparities immediately initiating an apprehension.

Absent solutions for these two issues, i wonder it if will be effective.

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