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June 3, 2013 #2

By HAND and by email

Public Safety Committee, Cambridge City Council
795 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139

Re: Automated license plate readers / Committee Report #3

Dear Councillor-Chairman Kelley, Vice Mayor Simmons, and Councillor Toomey:

I write to draw your attention to the fact that the City of Cambridge Police Department has deployed automated license plate reader/scanning devices on some of both their automobile and motorcycle units. I was made aware of this deployment last week, and I understand it to be recent.

I urge your committee to investigate fully and publish clear documentation on what information is recorded and how it is retained. A single scanner has the ability to record the time and location of hundreds of cars per minute, and to retain that information for years. With a few Police vehicles near high-traffic intersections, the City has the potential to build a near-comprehensive database tracking the location and peak-hour travels of individual vehicles, and thus individual people.

This is a powerful crime-fighting tool, but this information also has potentially enormous privacy concerns—safeguards to ensure that this information is used properly are critical.

At the Jan. 23, 2013 meeting of your committee (report CRT 2013 #13, placed on file at the Feb. 11 Council meeting), in response to a question of “whether [license plate readers] are in use, or are there plans to adopt them?”, a representative of the Police Department averred, “We do not possess them right now.”¹

To discover that they have been deployed a few months after that question was asked without notice to the Committee is concerning, especially given the prospective nature of the inquiry.

I hope you may have some time to address this at your upcoming meeting on Wednesday.

Very truly yours,

John A. Hawkinson 3 June 2013

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Cc: Cambridge City Council
Donna Lopez, Interim City Clerk, for inclusion in the record

¹Quotations are from the meeting; presentation in the committee report is analagous but not identical.