

Oakland Approves Funds for High Tech Surveillance

High-tech surveillance center will use video cameras, license plate readers, gunshot detection microphones and Twitter to address crime and terrorist activity.

By **Victor Li** [All Articles](#)

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Here's a bit of trivia: "**Oakland, We're For You**" by the Goodtime Washboard Three is the **official song of Oakland, California**. The city might want to consider changing it to "**Someone's Watching Me**," by Rockwell.

Civil libertarians are up in arms after the Oakland **City Council** voted unanimously on July 31 to accept a \$2.2 million federal grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to help build a round-the-clock surveillance center that will help law enforcement officials monitor the city using a vast network of video cameras, license plate readers, and gunshot detection microphones.

The Domain Awareness Center was originally proposed in 2008 with the limited purpose of monitoring the Port of Oakland to protect it from terrorist attacks. Since then, the DAC's scope has expanded to encompass the entire city, including Oakland's schools and sport complexes. According to **The San Francisco Chronicle**, the center will eventually cost an estimated \$10.9 million in federal money.

The DAC plan will integrate the city's existing police and fire dispatch system into a new surveillance network, helping officials respond more quickly during emergencies. Officials will have access to facial recognition and crime-mapping software, private alarm detection programs, and Twitter feeds to better coordinate their responses during a crisis.

Based on the DAC's technical plan, the center plans on installing 35 cameras at target locations, and more than 100 police sensor sites inside the city — as well as approximately 700 video cameras inside Oakland schools. At the **Port of Oakland**, a major hub that includes both maritime shipping and the Oakland airport, DAC will install 77 perimeter detection cameras, 34 thermal intrusion detection cameras, and 21 pan-tilt-zoom cameras.

PROTESTS

American Civil Liberties Union attorney Linda Lye, who helped lead the opposition to the DAC, told *Law Technology News* that the project was the epitome of a mission creep. "It starts out as port security, then expands to include comprehensive surveillance of Oakland residents who have nothing to do with the port," she said. "What does surveillance of school children have to do with port security?"

City officials, however, say the DAC is about streamlining the emergency response system and not about spying on Oakland residents. **Ahsan Baig**, the manager of information technologies for Oakland, **told the council**



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that the DAC addressed a long-standing problem in Oakland — namely that the port and city had different systems and information formats. "The core of the DAC is the software," said Baig. "One of the challenges we have is that a lot of the time, if you are responding to an emergency, you have to look into so many different databases and applications. This application will automate a lot of those workflows."

Oakland Local, an independent non-profit news organization, reported that **Renee Domingo**, the city's director of emergency services, said that the DAC will connect Oakland with other government agencies, as well as public transportation, to share data and video streams. "The most important purpose of the center is to save lives by coordinating real-time information," Domingo told **the Chronicle**. She also pledged to work with civil liberties groups in developing privacy safeguards, telling the city council on July 30 that she hoped to meet with privacy experts to develop a set of protocols between November 2013 and February 2014 so that the city council would have the final proposal by March 2014.

Other cities with similar surveillance centers include New York, Chicago, and Long Beach, California. **According to the Center for Investigative Reporting**, Seattle and Los Angeles are building domain awareness centers for local ports.

The ACLU's Lye criticized the city council for approving the DAC without addressing privacy concerns. Lye said she intends to work with the council to develop privacy protocols. She expressed numerous concerns, including how the information would be gathered, what it would be used for, whether it would be stored in a secure location. However, Lye said her ultimate view is that the DAC is an unconstitutional usurpation of civil liberties.

"Warrantless surveillance of residents who have engaged in no wrongdoing whatsoever, where there's no suspicion of criminal wrongdoing, is offensive," said Lye. She refused to rule out using litigation to try and halt construction of the DAC.

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