

April 17, 2025

Dear Milwaukee Common Council -

We are writing to you today with a request grounded in both urgency and care: In light of the facial recognition item on this evening's Fire and Police Commission agenda and your recent approval of surveillance drone use by the Milwaukee Police Department, we're calling on you to:

1. Impose at least a two-year pause on the adoption of any new surveillance technology, especially facial recognition; and
2. Develop and pass a framework to regulate existing surveillance technology with meaningful opportunities for community input.

We know many of you on this Council, and in the Milwaukee Police Department, care deeply about the safety and well-being of our city. We do not believe you are acting in bad faith. However, as history has shown time and again, authoritarianism does not always arrive with flashing lights and villainous speeches — it often comes wrapped in routine procedure, paperwork, and people “just doing their jobs.”

We are already seeing how surveillance technology is being weaponized in real time. **Data gathered from facial recognition, automated license plate readers, artificial intelligence, and other surveillance tools are being used by governments, including our own, to target and detain individuals.** ICE — which has sent innocent American residents to gulags in El Salvador, is rapidly expanding its surveillance interface in local communities. It is being used to monitor and prosecute political protesters, people seeking reproductive health care, LGBTQ+ individuals, and doctors trying to provide care. These are not projections — ***these are present-day realities carried out by bad actors within the federal government and local jurisdictions.***

While we trust that our local leaders and police officers may have good intentions, history reminds us how quickly larger systems can override those intentions. Already, we are watching as MPD expands its collection of real-time video from its own cameras to networks of cameras on private buildings. Data collected in Milwaukee does not stay in Milwaukee. Once it enters a federal pipeline, it can be accessed, shared, and used in ways we cannot predict—or stop.

That's why now, more than ever, we must choose restraint. The rule of law at the federal level is unraveling before our eyes. The best protection we can offer our communities is not adding more tools that can be turned into weapons. **These tools might not be used harmfully today, but could be weaponized against your constituents tomorrow.**

Consider this: less than 60 years ago, Police Chief Harold Breier used surveillance to target civil rights activists, LGBTQ+ people, and Black Milwaukeeans. That is not ancient history — it's living memory for many in our city. And those who carried out that surveillance often believed they were "just doing their jobs." Now ask yourself: ***what if Breier had access to today's surveillance technologies?*** What could have been done to those same communities — communities that were fighting for a better Milwaukee, a better Wisconsin, and a better America?

We are not calling for a ban — we are simply calling for a **two-year pause on acquiring new surveillance technologies**, especially facial recognition, while we assess the potential risks. We urge you to **pass a framework for regulating existing surveillance technology, such as adopting a Community Control Over Police Surveillance (CCOPS) Ordinance** to bring democratic accountability to these decisions before it's too late.

This moment presents a rare and vital opportunity. The Common Council can become the roadblock against creeping authoritarianism. **Be the guardrails to prevent harm before it starts.** Be remembered in Milwaukee's history as the public servants who chose accountability, humanity, and courage when it counted most.

We urge you not to let Milwaukee be complicit in injustice. **Do not allow our city to feed a surveillance machine we can no longer control.**

Pause the surveillance. Pass CCOPS. And be the leaders this moment demands.

Sincerely,
The American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin