

LICENSE PLATE CAMERAS: TOWN MEETING QUESTION SHEET

Vendor neutral. For residents, board members, and local officials | Current as of July 2026



How to use this sheet. You will likely get two or three minutes. Do not try to ask everything. Pick two or three questions, ask them plainly, and request a written answer for the rest. The goal is not to win an argument in the room. It is to get commitments into the public record where they can be checked later. Questions below are written so that a well run program can answer them easily.

1. SCOPE AND COST

#	ASK THIS	WATCH FOR THIS ANSWER
1	How many cameras, at exactly which locations, and who chose the locations? <i>Placement determines who gets watched most.</i>	Locations are confidential or still to be determined by the vendor.
2	What is the total cost across the full contract term, not the first year?	Only a per camera monthly figure is offered.
3	At the end of the contract, who owns the cameras and the data? <i>These are usually leased. The vendor removes them.</i>	Uncertainty, or the answer is that the town owns the data but not the platform.
4	Was this competitively bid, or sole sourced?	Sole source with no documented justification.
5	What is the funding source in year three and beyond when the grant runs out?	Grant funded start with no identified recurring source.

2. DATA RETENTION AND ACCESS

#	ASK THIS	WATCH FOR THIS ANSWER
6	How many days is data retained, and is that number in the contract or only in software? <i>The vendor default dropped to 7 days in Aug 2026. A toggle can be changed back. A contract term cannot.</i>	Retention is described only as a system setting.
7	Who inside the department can run a search, and does a supervisor approve it?	All sworn personnel have unrestricted search rights.
8	Is a documented reason required for every search, and is the reason field a free text box or a controlled list? <i>Free text fields are how improper searches get hidden.</i>	Free text with no review.
9	Does the vendor retain any copy, including anonymized or aggregated derivatives, after we terminate?	Anything other than a clear yes to full deletion.

3. OUTSIDE SHARING

#	ASK THIS	WATCH FOR THIS ANSWER
10	Is statewide lookup on? Is national lookup on? Is federal sharing on? Please answer each separately. <i>In several cities these were on by default and nobody knew for years.</i>	A single combined answer, or a promise to check later.
11	Which specific outside agencies have queried our cameras in the last twelve months, and how many times each?	No one has ever pulled that report.
12	If an outside agency violates our written policy, how would we find out, and what happens then?	Reliance on the other agency to self police.
13	Does our policy conflict with any state law passed in 2026 on plate reader sharing or retention?	No one has reviewed it against current state law.

4. ACCURACY AND WRONGFUL STOPS

#	ASK THIS	WATCH FOR THIS ANSWER
14	Is an officer required to independently confirm a plate before making a stop based on an alert? Is that in written policy? <i>Misreads have produced high risk stops on innocent drivers.</i>	It is described as standard practice rather than written policy.
15	If a resident is wrongly flagged, who do they call, and what is the deadline to fix it?	No named owner and no timeline.
16	What is our measured false alert rate over the last year?	Not tracked.

QUESTION SHEET, CONTINUED

Oversight, contract exit, scope creep, and emergency management



5. OVERSIGHT AND AUDIT

#	ASK THIS	WATCH FOR THIS ANSWER
17	Has an audit of system usage ever been run? When, by whom, and what did it find? <i>In city after city, violations were found only once someone finally looked.</i>	Never audited, or audited internally with no written result.
18	Will the town commit to a published quarterly audit, with query counts broken out by agency and stated purpose?	Available on request instead of published.
19	Who audits the auditor? Is there any independent or citizen review role?	The department reviews itself only.
20	What is the disciplinary consequence for an employee who searches without a legitimate purpose?	Handled case by case with no defined standard.

6. CONTRACT TERMS AND EXIT

#	ASK THIS	WATCH FOR THIS ANSWER
21	If this board votes to end the program mid term, how fast do cameras go dark, and what does it cost? <i>At least one city could not switch its cameras off and covered the lenses instead.</i>	No termination for convenience clause.
22	Does the contract give us the right to audit the vendor, or only to audit ourselves?	No third party audit rights.
23	If state law changes and forces us to alter retention or sharing, does the price or term change?	Unknown, or the risk sits with the town.
24	Will this board add a sunset clause requiring an affirmative renewal vote and a published outcomes report in two years?	Resistance to any expiration date.

7. SCOPE CREEP

#	ASK THIS	WATCH FOR THIS ANSWER
25	Does this vote authorize only plate readers, or does it open the door to audio sensors, drones, and person description search from the same vendor? <i>Most major vendors now bundle more than plates. These are separate decisions.</i>	Bundled authorization, or one contract covering every product.
26	Will the department commit that this data will not be used for minor traffic or code enforcement?	Refusal to limit permitted uses in writing.
27	Can we see the vendor demonstration claims in writing? Specifically, can the system generate movement or heat maps from repeat sightings? <i>One council rescinded a contract a day after approving it over exactly this question.</i>	A verbal no with nothing in writing.

8. EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AND RESILIENCE

#	ASK THIS	WATCH FOR THIS ANSWER
28	Does our emergency operations plan or evacuation annex rely on this system? If so, what is the documented degraded mode when cellular service is down? <i>These units run on solar and cellular. Cell backhaul often fails early in a real event.</i>	It is in the plan with no fallback procedure.
29	Has anyone assessed whether residents avoiding contact with local government because of these cameras would affect shelter use, functional needs registries, or 911 calls?	Never considered.
30	What specific, measurable outcome would tell us in two years that this was worth the money?	No metric defined before purchase.

REQUEST IN WRITING

If you get vague answers, submit a public records request. Suggested language:

- The complete executed contract, all amendments, and the current statement of work.
- The adopted written use and privacy policy governing the system.
- All usage audit reports produced in the last twenty four months.
- A list of all external agencies with query access, and query counts by agency for the last twelve months.
- Current configuration settings for statewide lookup, national lookup, and federal sharing.
- Any internal affairs findings involving misuse of the system.

MY NOTES

CASE LAW AND STATE LAW REFERENCE

For when someone says “the courts have already settled this”



The honest one-sentence answer. The U.S. Supreme Court has never ruled on license plate readers; more than thirty lower courts have upheld warrantless use; and in June 2026 the Supreme Court decided a related location-data case that has put those rulings back in play. Anyone who tells you it is settled, in either direction, is overstating it. *This sheet is informational, not legal advice.*

WHAT THE KEY DECISIONS ACTUALLY HELD

CASE	HOLDING, AND WHAT IT IS GOOD FOR
Knotts <i>SCOTUS, 1983</i>	Tracking a vehicle on public roads is not a search. Still good law. This is the backbone of every defense of plate readers, and it is a fair point.
Carpenter <i>SCOTUS, 2018</i>	Seven days of cell phone location data required a warrant, because the aggregate differs from individual observations. Written narrowly on purpose.
McCarthy <i>Mass. high court, 2020</i>	First appellate ruling anywhere on plate readers. A dense enough network can be a search; four cameras were not. Binds only Massachusetts, but it is the framework everyone argues over.
Schmidt v. Norfolk <i>Federal court, Jan 2026</i>	Upheld Norfolk’s 172-camera network: coverage gaps meant it did not capture the whole of a person’s movements. On appeal right now. This is the case supporters will cite.
Chatrie <i>SCOTUS, 29 Jun 2026</i>	Getting location data is a Fourth Amendment search even for short windows, even from a third party, and regardless of how small a slice is produced. It did NOT decide what warrant standard applies, and it is not a plate reader case.
Tower dumps <i>Federal court, Aug 2026</i>	Held per se unconstitutional. Binds nobody else, but shows how quickly Chatrie is being extended to other bulk collection.

TWO CLAIMS YOU WILL HEAR, AND THE ACCURATE RESPONSE

IF SOMEONE SAYS	ACCURATE RESPONSE
“Over thirty courts have upheld this.”	True, and worth conceding. But no federal appeals court has decided it, most of those rulings predate June 2026, and the Fourth Circuit is considering it now.
“The Supreme Court just made these illegal.”	Not accurate. Chatrie is a cell phone case, never mentions plate readers, and expressly left the warrant standard undecided.

STATE LAW, WHICH MOVES FASTER THAN COURTS

There is **no federal statute** on plate readers at all. Roughly 16 states regulate them. Retention ranges from 3 minutes in New Hampshire to 21 days in Virginia, Maine and Washington to 5 years in Illinois for investigation-linked records. Washington’s SB 6002 (Mar 2026) is the current model: 21-day retention, no immigration-enforcement use, no cameras near schools, places of worship, or courts.

The number to quote: in August 2026 the Policing Project at NYU School of Law graded all 50 states on seven criteria. **Not one state passed all seven.** The best four, Connecticut, Oregon, Virginia and Washington, each met six. Whatever your state has, it has a documented gap, and that is a stronger opening than an argument about surveillance in the abstract.

FOUR MORE QUESTIONS, NOW THAT YOU HAVE THE CASE LAW

#	ASK THIS	WATCH FOR THIS ANSWER
31	Which specific court decision is our legal position based on, and has counsel reviewed it since June 2026?	A general reference to “the courts” with no case named.
32	Does our policy require a warrant or supervisor approval for retrospective searches of stored data, as opposed to real-time alerts? <i>These are two different things and no court requires the former yet.</i>	The two are treated as the same activity.
33	Which of the seven Policing Project criteria does our state law fail, and will this contract cover the gap?	Unfamiliarity with what state law does not cover.
34	Will the town commit not to purchase plate or location data from a commercial broker to do what a warrant would otherwise require? <i>No court has closed this gap. A town can close it locally.</i>	Refusal, or treating purchased data as a separate matter.

VENDORS AND THE DATA YOU CANNOT VOTE ON

For when someone says “we’ll just switch to a different company”



Stop asking which vendor. Plate reading is an industry, not a product. Agencies buy from Flock Safety, Motorola Solutions (Vigilant, PIPS, Avigilon), Axon, Genetec, Rekor, Verkada, Leonardo’s ELSAG, Neology, PlateSmart and others. Two towns running the same hardware can have completely different privacy realities, and two towns running different brands can be identical. **What matters is the coverage map and the access regime, not the logo on the pole.**

HOW THE DEPLOYMENT MODELS DIFFER

MODEL	WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE TOWN	WHAT TO WATCH
Subscription, vendor owned <i>e.g. Flock, Axon, Verkada</i>	Fast to deploy, low IT burden, predictable annual cost. The town never owns the hardware and the vendor removes it at contract end.	Vendor cloud holds the only copy. Shared network features may be on by default. Exit is contractual, not physical.
Purchase, enterprise <i>e.g. Motorola, Genetec, ELSAG</i>	Town owns hardware, data can sit on local systems, sharing is configurable. Far higher cost per camera, so usually far fewer cameras.	Integration complexity, and check whether the vendor also runs a commercial data business (see below).
Software only / buy to own <i>e.g. Rekor, PlateSmart</i>	Runs on cameras you already have. Lowest cost, strongest local control, no vendor national database by default.	Governance is entirely on the town. No vendor guardrails means no vendor guardrails.

THE HALF YOUR COUNCIL DOES NOT CONTROL

A large share of the plate data an officer can search was never collected by government. Cameras fitted to repossession trucks, and to ordinary looking cars, scan every plate they pass. That feeds a commercial database reported at **more than 15 billion sightings, growing by roughly 250 million a month**, sold to insurers, lenders, private investigators and law enforcement. Reporting indicates commercial sources make up a substantial share, in some accounts around two thirds, of what is searchable in certain law enforcement systems.

Commercial data flows **into** law enforcement search. Agency data is **not** shared back out. And the commercial side involves no council vote, no public records obligation, and no local audit.

Why this matters at your meeting: cancelling a contract, or switching brands, changes only the municipal half. Your residents stay in the commercial database either way. That is not an argument against acting locally. It is an argument for being precise about what local action actually achieves, and for taking the question to your state legislature as well.

FOUR MORE QUESTIONS ON VENDORS AND DATA SOURCES

#	ASK THIS	WATCH FOR THIS ANSWER
35	Was this competitively bid against at least one buy-to-own or software-only option, and what did those cost? <i>The cost gap per camera can be 17x to 100x, which is what drives density.</i>	Only subscription vendors were evaluated.
36	Does this vendor, or any affiliate or sister company, operate a commercial license plate database sold to insurers, lenders, or private investigators?	Unfamiliarity with the vendor’s corporate structure.
37	Will our officers be able to search commercial plate data through this system, and if so under what policy? <i>This is a separate decision from the town’s own cameras.</i>	The two data sources are treated as one thing.
38	If we ever switch vendors or cancel entirely, what specifically changes for residents, and what does not?	A promise that cancelling solves the problem.
39	Does any product from this vendor, or anything connected to this platform, perform face matching , meaning putting a name to a face from a database? <i>Ask it this way. “Do the cameras have facial recognition?” invites a technically true no.</i>	An answer about the cameras only, rather than the vendor and the platform.
40	If the answer is no today, is that a contract term or just current company policy? <i>One major vendor reversed its public no-face-matching position in Dec 2025.</i>	A policy statement offered as if it were a guarantee.

FACIAL RECOGNITION: THE PRECISE VERSION

For when someone says “there’s no facial recognition”



FACES: THREE DIFFERENT THINGS

Vendors and officials often blur these together. Separate them and the conversation gets precise.

Face detection noticing a face is present. Used for blurring and redaction, and for indexing.

Face re-identification spotting the same face again across footage, without knowing whose it is.

Face matching putting a name to a face from a database. **This is the one that matters.**

On the plate reader itself the answer is generally no: these cameras are aimed at plates, and agencies commonly state the images do not capture identifiable faces. But at least one major plate reader vendor sells facial recognition as part of the same law enforcement product line, and real-time crime centre platforms exist to put many feeds on one screen. **Your plate reader can do nothing but plates and still sit one tab away from a system that does faces.**