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ACLU-NC Fights San Francisco Surveillance Camera Expansion By Jeremy Chen

ACLU of Northern California activists, joined by allies from local civil rights groups, packed a San Francisco Police Commission meeting last January to urge them to vote against the installation of 25 additional video surveillance cameras in eight locations around the city.

In less than two years, a "pilot program" of public surveillance has grown from two cameras to over 30 cameras, with funds budgeted this year for the additional 25 cameras, and plans for even more cameras in the years ahead.

The Police Commission approved the camera expansion despite evidence that crime has actually gone up in more than half the current San Francisco camera locations. Additionally, studies show that cameras do not prevent or reduce crime, and it has been found that the cameras stifle free speech and are used to unfairly target women and people of color.

But, in large part due to the work of the ACLU-NC and its allies, the Commission started to take notice of the ineffective and intrusive nature of the cameras. Members extensively questioned city representatives about the efficacy of the camera program and whether \$275,000 of taxpayer funds might be better spent on other programs such as community policing and improved lighting.

"We fully understand the need to respond to the very real problem of crime, but video surveillance is not the answer," said Mark Schlosberg, ACLU-NC Police Practices Policy Director. "Limited public safety dollars should be spent on proven programs such as improved lighting and foot patrols, rather than on an ineffective and invasive surveillance system." The Police Commission also mandated a comprehensive review of all existing and newly-approved camera locations within six months. This is a significant victory, since there has not yet been any review or evaluation of the existing cameras. Some Commissioners suggested that if the cameras were not effective in reducing crime, they should be removed.

The Commission further included an amendment that requires the cameras to be turned off during political demonstrations and several commissioners also cited the potential targeting of undocumented immigrants as a reason to oppose the cameras filming political protests.

"Once you are tracked by a video surveillance camera and your private information is collected, you don't know how it will be used or abused," said Nicole Ozer, Technology and Civil Liberties Policy Director of the ACLU-NC. "We need to work together to find and fund real solutions that will make our communities safer while respecting our civil rights." For more information, please visit http://aclunc.org/issues/technology/say_no_to_video_surveillance.shtml, and look for our forthcoming report: "I Spy With My Big Eye: Video Surveillance in California."