



CITY OF COSTA MESA

77 Fair Drive
Costa Mesa, CA 92626

Agenda Report

File #: 26-315

Meeting Date: 7/21/2026

TITLE:

FLOCK SAFETY AUTOMATED LICENSE PLATE READER (ALPR) REPORT AND PRESENTATION

DEPARTMENT: POLICE DEPARTMENT

PRESENTED BY: JARED BARNES, POLICE LIEUTENANT

CONTACT INFORMATION: JARED BARNES POLICE LIEUTENANT,
(714) 754-5125

RECOMMENDATION:

Based on the demonstrated success of the Costa Mesa Police Department's Automated License Plate Reader (ALPR) program, staff recommends that the City Council approve the continued use of Flock Safety ALPR system.

BACKGROUND:

In February of 2026, members of the Community expressed comments at City Council meetings regarding security breaches and misuse of the Flock Public Safety system. Based on the concerns expressed by members of the public, the Costa Mesa Police Department will address community concerns regarding the use of Flock technology and the safeguards in place to protect privacy.

Flock Safety Data Security Incidents: Several California agencies have reported data security incidents involving Flock Safety's ALPR system. In January 2026, Mountain View PD disclosed that a "national lookup" setting, enabled by Flock without the department's knowledge, allowed federal agencies (including ATF and Langley Air Force Base) to search its data between August and November 2024, while a separate "statewide lookup" setting resulted in roughly 600,000 unauthorized queries by about 250 California agencies over one year. Flock disabled the national lookup feature statewide in March 2025. In fall 2025, a public records request revealed that Santa Cruz PD's data had been accessed by out-of-state agencies lacking data-sharing agreements, a violation of California's ALPR Privacy Act, prompting Santa Cruz to terminate its Flock contract and Flock to further restrict audit record visibility. These incidents stemmed from a pre-March 2025 system design that allowed data-sharing settings to be enabled without agencies' full knowledge or consent. Flock's corrective actions were to disable national lookup, restricting statewide sharing, and adding mandatory configuration logging, directly addressing these issues. Costa Mesa has confirmed that the national lookup setting was never enabled on its cameras, that no Costa Mesa data has been shared with out-of-state or federal agencies, and that the City does not release Flock search data in response to public records requests.

In 2023-2024, during a Costa Mesa Police Department administrative investigation, investigators discovered misconduct in the use of the Flock system by an employee. The Costa Mesa Police Department took immediate action to stop the access and investigate the misuse of the system. Based on the investigation, the employee resigned, and the case was forwarded and charged by the Orange County District Attorney's Office.

While concerns are understandable, given recent incidents statewide, it is important to place them in the context of how and why the Costa Mesa Police Department began using the Flock Safety system.

Over the last 15 years, law enforcement agencies have employed Automated License Plate Reader (ALPR) technology to locate stolen vehicles and solve crimes involving the use of automobiles. The evolution of ALPR technology has made these products more affordable and prevalent among law enforcement. Although the Police Department had previously deployed mobile ALPRs for a number of years, those devices reached the end of their operational life and are no longer in use.

In June 2022, the City entered into an agreement with Flock Safety for 31 fixed ALPR cameras throughout the city. In 2023, 15 additional cameras were acquired utilizing funds from the state Organized Retail Theft (ORT) Grant, bringing the current total to 46 Flock ALPR cameras. Cameras are strategically positioned to monitor major entry and exit points throughout the city to aid criminal investigations, recover stolen vehicles, apprehend wanted suspects, and locate missing persons.

Flock Safety utilizes artificial intelligence to analyze photos of vehicles and capture date, time, location, and license plate details, as well as vehicle type and color, enabling retroactive search capabilities. The Police Department also utilizes Flock's real-time notifications, which immediately alerts officers when stolen vehicles, vehicles used in crimes, or vehicles associated with wanted criminals are captured by ALPR, allowing officers to respond, investigate, and apprehend suspects before additional crimes occur in Costa Mesa. In addition, the department is able to view community partners' Flock Information from homeowner associations and private retailers within the city.

Flock does not intentionally photograph vehicle occupants and does not employ facial recognition. ALPR photographs have been deemed legal by courts on numerous occasions, as there is no expectation of privacy on a public roadway. The Costa Mesa Police Department maintains accountability with the Flock system by implementing audit protocols, including consistent supervisory review and administrative oversight of all license plate reader queries, case justifications, and automated access logs that track every search.

The Costa Mesa Police Department has created a public transparency portal link that provides an overview of its Automated License Plate Reader (ALPR) program through the department's website. The portal also includes a link to Flock Safety's transparency page, where community members can review the department's ALPR policies, system usage, camera locations, data sharing practices, and program statistics. The Costa Mesa Police Department complies with Public Request Act (PRA) requests by providing responsive records when permitted, and lawfully withholding information related to active investigations in accordance with applicable Government Code exemptions. From 2025-2026, the department received 13 PRA's regarding Flock. Seven requests were exempt from public disclosure. Five requests were released to the requesting parties with information ranging from procurement data, information shared with other law enforcement agencies, and a list of officers authorized to use Flock. One request was deferred to the City Clerk's office.

Flock cameras are self-sustaining, utilizing solar power and cellular (LTE) communications, with all maintenance provided by the vendor. The all-inclusive lease is \$3,000 per camera annually and includes a two-year warranty, Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS)-compliant cloud hosting, unlimited user licenses, continuous software improvements and camera setup, mounting, shipping, and handling. The total annual cost is \$151,800.

ANALYSIS:

In June 2022, the City leased 31 Flock Safety ALPR cameras through Omnia Partners Cooperative Agreement with Insight Public Sector. A subsequent cooperative agreement through Omnia Partners with Insight Public Sector was executed for the lease and maintenance of 46 Flock Safety ALPR camera systems through April 2027.

Flock ALPR cameras provide significant law enforcement benefits, including faster suspect vehicle identification, real-time alerts, and improved investigative efficiency. Rather than relying solely on witness descriptions, investigators can search by:

- License plate (full, partial, paper, or missing)
- Vehicle color, make, and model
- Unique features such as roof racks, decals, or damage

This capability is especially valuable when suspects remove, swap, or obscure license plates. Flock generates alerts, often within 30 seconds, when a photographed vehicle matches one in the California Stolen Vehicle Database or is associated with a wanted, missing, or abducted person. ALPR also enables detectives to rapidly identify investigative leads for cases that would otherwise require hours or days of manual video review. The system helps investigators establish time and location evidence, and connections between multiple crime scenes, reducing investigative workload while improving case clearance rates. Flock does not capture names or personal information of motorists or passengers. Search records are retained for a period of 365 days. This retention period ensures that relevant data remains available for investigations, which may be initiated or discovered months after the underlying incident.

In the past 12 months, Costa Mesa's ALPR cameras have directly led to over 100 felony arrests, including cases involving grand theft, possession of stolen vehicles, embezzled vehicles, hit and run traffic collisions, burglaries, assault with a deadly weapon, sexual assault, crimes against children, and homicide. Flock has also assisted in the recovery of 20 stolen vehicles and the location of three reported missing persons. These results are consistent with Flock's 2025 Impact Census, a study of nearly 700 agencies, which found that Flock technology assisted in solving an estimated 20% of cleared cases and contributed to more than half of stolen vehicle recoveries in over 40% of customer jurisdictions.

No alternative ALPR vendor has replicated Flock's established California investigative network of more than 30,000 cameras. The Costa Mesa Police Department has researched three alternate vendors. The alternative vendors either lack the regional footprint of networks or do not have sharing capabilities with other local law enforcement agencies. Criminal activity is not confined to a single city; offenders routinely travel across city boundaries and from neighboring counties to commit crimes in our community. Trusted by over 5,000 law enforcement agencies and 1,000 private businesses,

Flock Safety enables investigators to identify, track, and locate suspects regardless of where they reside. Loss of access to this network would represent a significant reduction in the Police Department's investigative capabilities.

The Police Department operates its Flock ALPR program in compliance with California Civil Code § 1798.90.5, et seq. (Senate Bill 34), which governs the collection, storage, use, and sharing of ALPR data. Under state law, ALPR data may only be shared with California state law enforcement agencies authorized by the California Department of Justice. Flock Safety's improved data safeguards, implemented progressively from March 2025 through May 2026, ensure California agencies, including Costa Mesa, do not inadvertently share data with federal or out-of-state entities, consistent with SB 34 requirements. Per the Master Service Agreement and the Flock Safety Policy for Responding to Legal Demands for Customer data, the Costa Mesa Police Department owns its own ALPR data (Attachments "1" & "2"), and controls what California agencies are provided access. Per our policies and State law, our ALPR system can only be used for legitimate law enforcement purposes and will never be utilized for immigration enforcement or for any purpose not specific to the enforcement of California laws. In addition, the Costa Mesa Police Department utilizes Flock's multi-factor authentication to ensure that only verified personnel can access the system, adding a critical layer of security to sensitive data. Access is strictly controlled, and unauthorized users are prohibited from the system, with safeguards in place to prevent, detect, and address any misuse.

Staff recommends that the City retain the Flock Safety ALPR contract while continuing to monitor and audit data access to ensure that ALPR information is used solely for legitimate California law enforcement purposes.

ALTERNATIVES:

City Council may provide feedback and direction on the City's use of Flock Safety ALPR.

FISCAL REVIEW:

There is no new fiscal impact. Funding for the lease and maintenance of 46 Flock ALPR systems has been included in the General Fund and under the ORT Grant, which will cover the current 3-year agreement to lease and maintain 46 Flock ALPR cameras through April 2027.

LEGAL REVIEW:

The City Attorney's Office has reviewed the Flock report and has approved it as to form.

CITY COUNCIL GOALS AND PRIORITIES:

This item supports the City Council Goal:

- Strengthen the public's safety and improve the quality of life.

CONCLUSION:

Based on the demonstrated success of the Costa Mesa Police Department's Automated License Plate Reader (ALPR) program, staff recommends that the City Council approve the continued use of Flock Safety ALPR system.