

Guest commentary: Changing Oakland's reputation with a development of a privacy policy

By Tracy Rosenberg
Guest Commentary
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When out-of-towners think about Oakland, stories about dangerous flatlands filled with guns and gangs have been regular images. But we can change the story and, slowly, we are.

One more opportunity to rebrand Oakland as a progressive and forward-thinking city lies in front of us next Tuesday, when the city will begin a review of the privacy policy recommendations developed over the past year by the Ad-Hoc Privacy Committee.

In months of packed City Council meetings in 2013, people from all over Oakland grappled with the security state, vigorously debating the balance between surveillance and privacy represented by the Domain Awareness Center, a fusion center proposed as a citywide dragnet. The robust community conversation saw an overflowing council room with public comment extending into the wee hours of the morning.

The people of Oakland rearranged the plan, and with overwhelming public support, the DAC was rolled back to only the Port of Oakland area, and the council convened a panel of Oaklanders to discuss and develop a policy recommendation to protect the privacy of those who work and live in the city and prevent overreach and civil liberties abuses.

The past year and a half has provided frightening revelations about the extent of surveillance by some branches of the government. Images out of Ferguson, Missouri, reminded us that local law enforcement can and does misuse resources to terrorize inner-city populations.

The people of Oakland were wary. It can't be emphasized enough how remarkable the process that followed was. The city listened to the people, reversed course and put the nuts-and-bolts details in the hands of the people who would be impacted by the end results.

The fruits of this process include a four-pronged policy recommendation, including a comprehensive privacy policy covering access to the DAC data and equipment, changes to the city's whistle-blower ordinance, creation of a standing civilian privacy committee, and a transparency ordinance that requires usage restrictions and guidelines for any military/war or spying equipment bought, loaned, leased or given to the city for law enforcement purposes.

The committee's final recommendation can be seen at oaklandprivacy.wordpress.com.

The first public hearing on the privacy policy will be at 6 p.m. Tuesday at the City Council's Public Safety Committee meeting at Oakland City Hall. The meeting is open to the public. The challenge is for the city to step into this historic opportunity to break new ground with a citizen-developed comprehensive privacy protection package.

They don't crack jokes about the legislative sausage factory for no reason. But in this case, the city has much to gain by embracing wholeheartedly a cutting-edge package of privacy protections for this diverse, political and creative city we call our own. This can become a model for urban areas across the nation and change the headlines about Oakland and Oakland's relationship to issues of safety, security and surveillance.

It's more than time.

Tracy Rosenberg is executive director of Media Alliance, an Oakland-based communications policy advocacy nonprofit. Go to www.media-alliance.org for more information.

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