

Transcript: Interview With Conyers Police Chief R. Scott Freeman

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About this transcript: This is a partial transcript of an on-the-record interview, produced by transcription software from the audio recording. It begins partway through the interview and ends before the recording did. Chief Freeman is the primary speaker; questions are from CJ Lester. Other department staff were present.

[Transcript begins partway through the interview.]

...Officer into the city manager for review before it goes to the mayor and council. And so when that budget is actually submitted to them for review, it's packaged up and submitted.

So part of that is, you know, once they once they give approval for my record, my requested spending to take place, then that is giving the approval to move forward with whether I've purchased I want to purchase vehicles where they want to purchase radios, uniforms, ammunition, everything that I need to run the Conyers Police Department, they have to vote on.

So nothing is ever purchased without going through some approval process. Now whatever level that is depends on what we need to buy.

So for example, vehicles, we simply go through the state contract, and we are allotted by budgetary approval every year and working through finance a certain number of vehicles every year.

So once they vote on the budget, that sets us up for the next fiscal year.

So as in the case with Flock, when we specifically talk about the Safe Cities contract, the Safe Cities Agreement was put in place in order to consolidate a whole slew of different self-standing, standalone contracts that encompass the drone as first responder, the actual Flock 911 OS system, all of our license plate readers, the gunshot technology, because prior to Safe Cities, all of those were standalone agreements.

And I signed all of those and the Safe Cities agreement was specifically intended to consolidate those, to reduce our overall expenses over the course of 10 years.

The more you sign, the more of a discount you can get. I know you've looked at that, so you can see how that math works.

And then specifically when we were working on negotiating that contract, we factored in and specifically put in a fiscal and annual way for the mayor and the council to be able to remove themselves from that contract for budgetary reasons, because you never know where the economy will go.

So there's a specific language in there that always provides the governing authority a way to remove themselves from this specific contract I can speak on.

Say remove, that means it would be for the city manager, right? What's the question again?

Being removed, like removed from the vote or like from the city council and the mayor.

So it would take a vote for the mayor, from the mayor and council to remove this from the contract, correct.

Okay. And that would be a budgetary, for say some reason, the city decided it was not going to fund Flock for whatever reason, let's say the economy just really took a turn for the worse.

I've been through several of those here at the city where we were really getting lean, then that would be an option based on the contractual language that's currently in there, and the mayor and council could do that, yes.

Okay. All right. That was just my, I was confused like, "Oh, there hadn't been a vote," and how he's able to do it, you know?

Well, so to add context to that, it goes back to what I said earlier. I don't ever do anything in a vacuum.

I'm not running the Central Intelligence Agency. I have been, I've used the retreats year after year to present the plans for the police department's technology to advance.

So every time that we have decided that we were going to expand our public safety camera system, and you know, once case in point, they were very heavily involved when we expanded into Hunting Creek.

I voiced my concerns to the mayor and council then, and it was a different mayor and council then, that I had reservations about putting our public safety cameras up into a residential area, because that was our first time that we had actually ventured into putting cameras into a residential area.

And none of that may sound odd for the police chief to be saying, I have privacy concerns as we move into that arena, but I do share in that concern that there are some, you know, there are privacy issues and concerns, whether it's the cameras or LPR, and we need to do a good job of that as the police department and making sure those are known.

And those cameras did go up in Hunting Creek because I was told by the mayor and council that we hear your concerns, put them up.

We had significant crime levels in Hunting Creek. We had a number of shootings, a number of people being beat, drug problems, random gunfire, that was a common, almost every night occurrence.

And kudos to the mayor and council for pushing forward with that, because now Hunting Creek is an extremely-- Mayor and city council now.

That was, it was a little bit of a different makeup. I know Coach Stroud was the one who told me that, "Yeah, we hear your concerns about the privacy," put them up anyway. So the council has ebbed and flowed over the years, so it's been a different makeup.

So I would not say necessary, but I can say that every retreat, one of the big focus of the content of the retreat coming from the police department is our focus on technology going forward.

So I know they were very heavily involved with, have been involved in all aspects of the technology that we use, not just with Flock and LPR and gunshot technology and DFR.

They have been very involved with our body-worn camera deployment through the Axon agreement and contract as well.

So the mayor and council, while we have that strong city manager, so the city manager runs daily operations, so I report to him and get all of my direction from him, but we still collectively, and we have an extremely, extremely cohesive culture here of keeping our mayor and council informed of everything technology wise,

because it's really a really big thing of what we do is being able to use that technology to keep the city safe.

And our crime stats show that as being a very, very effective tool. And like on the video, they're talking about the community part.

Do anything with that or are y'all going to start a new page for that or anything?

So I do share that the community needs to be informed and stay informed. And one of the things that we've done is we do have the Flock transparency portal up on the website that allows everybody to get data, certain data.

I can't obviously see tags, but you can see, you can go to our Conyers police home, and you can see on the left-hand side right here where these, the Flock transparency portal is there, gives you an overview, talks about data retention, total number of cameras, so we tell everything that is there.

I mean, this is available to any citizen. So like I said, we're not keeping secrets.

The top five offenses, who we're sharing with, who we're receiving data from, it's all here.

And on the side of DFR, this is our DFR page as well. It gives the total calls responded to, so it gives you a total view of everything.

And then if you click on the flights tab, it gives you details about each one of the flights.

And it'll load up because it'll actually show you the flight path. And I don't people don't even know this is there.

People don't even know this is there. So we have that. We publish an annual report that is also on the website.

We actually have hard copies available that we do an annual report. We started that last year.

That talks about our technology as well. So we're very transparent in what we do with being forthcoming with the community, the strategic, or so the annual reports, the transparency portals that we have.

This year we rolled out a CPD app that's available. So you can get information on the RedSpeed camera system that is in the school zones.

You can get DFR. All of this is available on the CPD app. As far as doing anything else in the community, because I've talked about what we're doing technology-wise, the community outreach we have with both Open HQ and our CPA, when we do go out into the community and we have these events, we incorporate some of that.

I do not have any plans to do anything additional because I think that there is a certain level of, I think we're being very open and transparent with people.

Now, I'm sure that you will find a number of people that think we need to be doing more.

My position will be is that we're doing everything to be transparent. The biggest thing and the biggest takeaway is that we're not being secretive about what we're doing.

We can't go to every single door inside the city and talk to every single person.

There is, visit our webpage, we are literally open source, open book, and we have a story to tell, you just gotta be ready and willing to listen.

I guess that points to the last point. Anything you'd like to say to the citizens about that you hadn't already like torn into the newspaper or whatever, I don't know.

How much time do you have? No, I understand when it comes to specifically about Flock and LPR technology, I understand the concerns.

I really do. as the Fourth Amendment and privacy. The video I watched explained it very well.

Yes, and I will say this, so when we talk specifically about the Fourth Amendment, I disagree with people and their perceptions that it is an invasion of privacy.

I respect their right to have that belief, but over 40 court cases and decisions have been made that if it is a public roadway, you're operating a vehicle that you have to have a tag on, and any police officer, and the courts have consistently ruled on any number of different cases that you want to look at.

If a police officer is observing something where he or she legally has a right to be at, that's not a Fourth Amendment violation.

So we put that into the context of license plate reader technology. It is a stationary device taking a picture of a vehicle with a tag.

There's no AI generated for that vehicle. It's not capturing faces. It's not capturing people inside.

It is a one shot of that vehicle at a moment in time. And it's not able at that point to say, okay, now we're going to track it on throughout the rest of the city.

So it has to pass another stationary LPR device for us to pick it up again.

And so when we look at the, and there have been some very good court cases when it comes to cell phones, the cell phone data that's generated, the data behind where we're looking at Carpenter or Chatrue or wherever case you may want to look at, the allusions to LPR, it is not a Fourth Amendment violation.

Now, if that changes, then my answer will change. But I want to go on constitutional policing principles and practices, and right now, there is not one single court in the land that I am currently, as we sit here, am aware of, that has said that using LPR technology, as this department has it deployed, is a violation of the Fourth Amendment.

Because if it was, we would not be doing that. I stand firm in my commitment to be transparent with this community.

That's why you've gotten absolutely no pushback from me. And really have gotten hopefully a lot more than what you expected.

[...]

Well, and I do think that, as you saw in the IACP video, there will be some people that you will never change their mind.

Some people are, and the majority of people that I have spoken with are very much for LPR technology.

I think that there are certainly ways that we can improve. We have to improve because there have been almost 50 police officers arrested or fired, disciplined, suspended, just in the state of Georgia alone. You look at whether it's Savannah or some of these other larger agencies that have had larger numbers.

Can we do a better job? Absolutely. Will we do a better job? Absolutely. It's incumbent upon us to demonstrate that we can use this technology wisely, and when people don't, we hold them accountable.

And I think that the agencies that have been doing the audits, including our own, where we have that violation, when we show and demonstrate that we are giving this power, we're giving this level of technology, and when people are using it for personal gain, and they're abusing it, and they're violating the law, and then we take the right step to have them criminally investigated because it's the morally, it's the ethical thing to do, I think that that reestablishes and reaffirms, or it should in my mind, the public's trust and confidence in us.

Now we have a lot to do, and we'll be working with the IACP on those guidelines, of which I will get to you so that you can see that, and then you can compare and contrast our current SOP.

We'll make any changes that we need to, to comply with the law. Did you not get that?

I don't think I did. I just got the two forms. Okay. So I will get you the old one and the new one once we actually roll that out, because I actually have the redacted version, because there's a phone number and an e-mail address that are coming out in the redacted version.

And we will be working with our legislators as well, letting them know, well, I was going to say, I'm using future to us.

I have already reached out to our legislators here to let them know I support these guidelines that are being recommended by the IACP and the National Sheriff's Association and these other organizations to put these guardrails in place for this technology.

In my 36 years, I've never seen anything more effective in being able to fight crime than this technology that has been rolled out right now, aside from the men and women who are carrying out and using the technology. And when we have these types of issues where people abuse it, I've seen it over and over again.

When GCIC was available, when you had mobile data computers coming out, there will be abuses, but we correct it, we hold people accountable, and we move forward.

You know, the banking industry has about a \$13 billion per year loss because of fraud.

We don't go shutting down the banking system in this country because of that. We work for ways to improve it.

And so as a final thought for the community, we're working hard to keep this community safe.

We're using technology as to make it the safest possible for them and their families, while also understanding the really the huge responsibility that we have and are very appreciative of their concerns about what we're doing with what we're capturing, both on video and in tags, and we will do the right thing.

And when we have someone who missteps, they will be held accountable. That's internally and through the criminal justice system.

[...]

But then I wanted to find out about the, how it was approved or, you know, that part of it.

Any other lingering questions on that? No, I think you answered it. Okay. But it wasn't a grant or it was made on there.

So when the manager talks about the cooperative agreement, he and I had talked about that.

So what cooperative agreements allow us to do is just to get better pricing. So it's a cooperative agreement and a state contract are essentially one and the same.

So at least in my experience here at the city. So like for police cars, we don't buy police cars until the state contract is issued out because that guarantees us a set price, and they're not going to go up.

So the city manager and I did talk about, when we were discussing the agreement, the Safe Cities contract in and of itself, which was nothing more, and I don't want to make it simple because it wasn't, but the Safe Cities contract consolidated all of these other contracts into one to allow us to have a much better financial deal than they were standalone and independently.

So cooperative agreements, I do know that Flock has one, and I can't remember what organization.

He had that information on his side. He had looked at. And then, but for Flock and their suite of services, whether it's DFR, there really was no one else out there at the time, based upon my own, because if you look at our procurement policy, you could either go with the cooperative agreement, sole source, or you could go name brand, which may not necessarily be applicable.

But for me, all of our agreements would have expended additional resources and funding had we not stayed with Flock and consolidated them all under one umbrella.

Because I know we all personally went and looked, because we were looking for a very specific DFR, a drone first responder product, and we looked at several, no one could provide it to us, which is one of the reasons why we then signed, or I then signed the DFR agreement, and then we moved into, we need to consolidate all of these into one master agreement, number one, for invoicing purposes, because it was driving everybody crazy, getting all of the invoices in at separate times, but when you do that, is you get a much more efficient process for finance, invoicing, paying out, and collectively with a 10-year agreement, it was right about a \$2.5 million discount.

So I will say this, one of the other questions that I did think that came in that you sent to me was did we do we cut any police officer positions?

So the answer to that is yes and no. What we did was, in order to, so the entire Flock agreement was funded by my recommendation to freeze six police officer positions to see how that would allow us to move forward.

So over the course of 10 years, factoring in a 4.5% annual increase for each police officer, that would be about a \$5.7 million expense for six police officers.

So when, and I have always told both my boss, the city manager, and the mayor and council, if I'm going to come with you asking for money, I'm al...

[Transcript ends here; the recording continued.]