

# Daily Hampshire Gazette



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## Columnist Dennis Bidwell seeks civility, facts in debate over cameras in downtown Northampton



Police Chief Jody Kasper, standing at left, fields a question during a meeting Sept. 13 at the Northampton Senior Center to discuss the use of surveillance cameras in downtown Northampton. GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

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There's more I need to know before I can make a thoughtful decision as a city councilor on the matter of additional municipal cameras in downtown Northampton, the idea floated by Police Chief Jody Kasper three weeks ago.

Many people find themselves in a similar open-minded situation at this early stage of the conversation. As we go forward, the community conversation launched by Kasper would benefit greatly from civility toward one another, making extra efforts to include the views of those who've not felt comfortable speaking up in public meetings and counting on fair and accurate assertions from one another.

Wherever we land as a community on this complicated topic, I hope we can look back at our process and feel good about it. Acceptance and buy-in of whatever decision we arrive at will be directly related to the way we work our process along the way.

We can do better than we have so far in public discussions of this matter in the days ahead. That starts with a meeting of the council's City Services Committee at 7 p.m. Oct. 2 in the council chambers, and includes future meetings of the full council, as well as whatever other forums the mayor, police chief or others might organize.

There is no need to rush to a judgment on this matter. If the police chief and mayor seek to formally propose investments by the city in additional downtown cameras (which are already in use in the parking garage, police station, and at major events and demonstrations) this would be presented to the City Council in February or March of 2018 as part of a proposed capital improvements budget. In the meantime, no decision is needed, though a healthy debate in advance of such a proposal is always welcome.

I have recommended that the resolution and ordinance introduced at last week's council meeting be tabled while the community conversation proceeds, and while we show our police chief the courtesy of absorbing the feedback she's heard and coming back to us with additional information and, perhaps, refined proposals. In short, we should slow the process down.

I'd like to hear more about the actual experience of communities like Amherst, Holyoke and Easthampton with their municipal cameras. I'd like to learn more from the experience of progressive communities like Seattle and San Francisco, which have been using municipal cameras for many years.

In whatever forums we discuss this matter, I hope that we can treat one another, and one another's views, with courtesy and civility. We don't have to let the intensely polarized national political scene translate into disrespectful ways of treating one another in Northampton.

I share the outrage at the actions of some police departments around the country, acting with racism and excessive force. But it's not fair to our local police department if we treat it as if it is the Ferguson, Missouri, department.

During the public comment period of last week's City Council meeting, a number of assertions were made about our police department which were quite unfair. Do we really believe that white SUVs, loaded with agents armed with three weapons systems, are stealthily prowling our downtown streets? Or that our Center Street police station is an armed fortress?



True, everyone has the right to exercise their free speech by saying what they want, but we should hold one another to at least a minimal expectation of accuracy and fairness when making statements that are broadcast and become part of the public record.

Part of the free speech we value, in and out of council meetings, also allows any member of the public to hold up whatever sign they want. And though outbursts and hissing are discouraged, this behavior nevertheless occurs.

Yes, all of this is protected free speech. But it hardly contributes to an atmosphere that welcomes diversity of opinion. We say we value inclusiveness. We have to recognize that the way we behave in public meetings can have either a welcoming or chilling effect on our desire to include all views.

I have heard from many people throughout the city — people familiar with our downtown as workers, shoppers, merchants, property owners and restaurant patrons — who have felt intimidated by the tone of recent public meetings about downtown. Some are reluctant to express their views about more cameras for fear of being labeled anti-First Amendment, or losing business.

Yet many of these are the people who, day in and day out, are interacting with the folks who make our downtown sidewalks their homes, who know firsthand what goes on, and who witness daily the nature of our police officers' interactions with the people on our streets and sidewalks. These are the people whose views we should be inviting to the conversation, not turning away.

In the end, I may very well conclude that additional downtown cameras are not the right idea for this community at this time. Or I might conclude they are.

Either way, I hope that my decisions, and the conclusions reached by others, are the product of thoughtful deliberation based on facts and a respectful inclusion of all viewpoints.

Dennis Bidwell, of Northampton, is the Ward 2 city councilor.