

Somerville aldermen hold off on GPS plan for city cars

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Somerville —

After several Somerville aldermen voiced concerns that the city's proposed GPS monitoring of city vehicles has not been fully vetted, the aldermen's Finance Committee will continue considering a funding request for the plan.

Thursday night at the board's last meeting before new members take their seats next year, Ward 7 Alderman and Finance Committee member Robert Trane asked aldermen to discharge a funding request for the GPS devices from the Finance Committee so the full board could vote on it, but withdrew his motion after several aldermen said they would not approve it based on what they know so far.

The city's request is to appropriate \$107,000 from Free Cash for a year of GPS monitoring service, which includes equipment.

Addressing a concern raised by Aldermen President Bill White at last week's Finance Committee meeting, Assistant City Solicitor Matthew Buckley said introducing GPS devices does not create a change in conditions that would need to be collectively bargained with local unions, pointing to the Labor Relations Commission's 2007 dismissal of a charge that the city of Worcester violated the law by requiring DPW sanders to carry and use GPS phones.

Buckley said GPS monitoring will enable the city to more efficiently and effectively deploy its resources, especially during events such as snowstorms, and the devices are not intended for anything else.

"It's not intended for the purpose of the close monitoring of employees for disciplinary purposes," Buckley said.

Mayoral aide Omar Boukili said the GPS monitoring was first proposed in conjunction with a more efficient fuel management system, and Alderman At Large Bruce Desmond said the intention of the technology is just that – to improve efficiency.

"I don't see much difference between this and putting in a different kind of radio in a snowplow or truck or car. It's a piece of equipment for management use," Desmond said. He added, "I don't think it's meant to punish anyone; it allows administrators to do their job more efficiently."

Trane said the point would not be “data snooping” or “looking over someone’s shoulder” – but he also suggested curbing the improper use of city vehicles could be among the benefits of GPS monitoring. He described the results of a pilot program earlier this year, in which GPS devices were placed on some city vehicles.

“It’s amazing, the amount of vehicles left running, the gas wasted, the pollution generated,” Trane said. “There are calls constantly that a DPW vehicle made an illegal left-hand turn or a truck was speeding, all these things. By having this equipment, we can make sure employees are driving safely and don’t leave their cars running for hours on end, wasting fuel and polluting the environment.”

Trane added, “It’s an enhancement to management, making sure people are where they’re supposed to be, doing what they’re supposed to do.”

Other aldermen hesitated.

“I have the feeling there’s another side to this and I would like to hear it. I was contacted by an SMEA member who had some real concerns about this being done outside collective bargaining,” said Ward 6 Alderman Rebekah Gewirtz, referring to the Somerville Municipal Employees Association. “I know it sounds like it can be done, but the question is, should it be done?”

Gewirtz asked how many times the matter was discussed by the Finance Committee and why the chairman did not call a committee of the whole meeting for a topic of this importance. A lot more people might have shown up at that night’s meeting if they had known the GPS funding request would possibly be discharged, she said.

Alderman At Large Jack Connolly agreed serious concerns have been uncovered and the public should have a chance to weigh in. Ward 2 Alderman Maureen Bastardi said she wasn’t prepared to vote on the appropriation and wanted more information about which vehicles would receive devices. Alderman At Large Dennis Sullivan urged further discussion of the matter in committee.

“If I’m sitting there as a union member in the city, I’m just not comfortable,” Sullivan said. “Is it carte blanche? Is every department going to be under the same guise? I’m just trying to figure out the scope of what you’re talking about.”

Before withdrawing his motion to discharge the item from committee, Trane responded that he has been talking about this idea for five years and his only intention was to save the board from wasting time.

“I didn’t want to put anything by anybody and I kind of resent some people implying that’s what’s going on here,” Trane said. “It isn’t.”