Critics Warn of 'a Dragnet of Surveillance' as U.S. Pushes Ahead with Plans for More 'Smart' Cities

As the U.S. government, tech companies, the media and urban developers double down on the idea that future cities must be "smart," critics warn the technology-driven urban projects will turn cities into "data farms."

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Global Research, March 31, 2023

Children's Health Defense 30 March 2023

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U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg last week announced $94 million in grant awards to fund 59 smart city technology projects across the country.

Despite widespread and mounting pushback against biometric surveillance and control systems associated with smart city technologies and the failure of the U.S. Department of Transportation's (DOT) previous attempt to grant-fund smart city transformation in Columbus, Ohio, Buttigieg told The Verge he thinks "smart city technologies matter more than ever."

Cities just need to take a different approach — experimenting with and testing out different technologies first, rather than implementing a "grand unified system" all at once, Buttigieg said.

The new grants, part of the Strengthening Mobility and Revolutionizing Transportation (SMART) Grants Program, are the first round of $500 million in funding that will be awarded for smaller smart mobility projects over the next five years, authorized under the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

In this funding round, DOT awarded smart grants for a range of projects, including drone surveillance or delivery, smart traffic signals, connected vehicles, autonomous vehicles, smart grid development, intelligent sensors and other Internet of Things (IoT) infrastructure. Some cities, including Los Angeles (LA), received multiple grants.

Smart city development typically focuses on the implementation of technologies like the IoT, 5G, cloud and edge computing, and biometric surveillance to track, manage, control and

extract profit from an array of urban processes.

Whitney Webb, an investigative journalist and smart cities critic, said the smart city infrastructureis meant to facilitate the development of cities "micromanaged by technocrats via an all-encompassing system of mass surveillance and a vast array of 'internet of things' devices that provide a constant and massive stream of data that is analyzed by artificial intelligence (AI)."

'Concept of a sensor in every home doesn't look as shiny as it once did'

Smart city projects began gaining traction in the U.S. in 2015, boosted by a program launched by then-DOT Secretary Anthony Foxx. Foxx, who went on to become the chief policy officer for Lyft, now works at Tulco, a data science venture capital firm. Foxx created the "Smart City Challenge," which offered a $50 million grant to the mid-sized city with the best proposal to remake their city as a "smart city."

Vulcan LLC, an investment and philanthropic organization dedicated to materializing the vision of Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen and whose profit-making services focus on real estate development, partly funded the federal grant.

Columbus, Ohio, beat out 77 other cities with its "revolutionary" proposal, but the project was by most accounts a failure — expensive trip-planning kiosks erected downtown were never used, autonomous shuttles had accidents, the public transportation platform was rarely downloaded and sensor-connected trucks failed to materialize.

Then, in May 2020, another paradigmatic smart city model project failed when Google smart city subsidiary Sidewalk Labs scrapped plans to build a smart city prototype in Toronto amid public outcry about surveillance and profiteering.

According to The Globe and Mail, Eric Schmidt, former head of Google parent company Alphabet, described the project in these terms:

"The genesis of the thinking for Sidewalk Labs came from Google's founders getting excited thinking of 'all the things you could do if someone would just give us a city and put us in charge.'"

Visions like these raised a lot of flags among both experts and the general public.

Even one of the smart city concept's biggest promoters, Wired Magazine, admitted that skepticism about smart cities had grown:

"Today, as citizens think more carefully about tech-enabled surveillance, the concept of a sensor in every home doesn't look as shiny as it once did."

San Francisco banned government use of facial recognition software. And Amazon is facing a class action lawsuit in New York City for failing to comply with the city's law that businesses must inform customers if they are harvesting their biometric data.

New York is one of several cities that have passed biometric laws. Several states, including Texas, Washington and Illinois also passed similar laws, Nick Corbishly reported in Naked Capitalism.

Global market for smart cities projected to reach $696 billion by 2028

But pushback hasn't stopped tech visionaries and states from moving forward with smart development projects. The global Smart Cities Market is projected to grow to $696 billion by 2028, growing from $467 billion in 2022, according to a [market research report](#) published Monday.

[Webb reported](#) that soon after Schmidt commented on the vision behind the Toronto smart city, then-New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo tapped him to lead an effort to reimagine post-pandemic life in the state, building smart city infrastructure through partnerships with the [Israeli government](#).

In fact, the [COVID-19](#) lockdowns led to a series of [positive PR pieces](#) promoting the implementation of smart cities and [several](#) [conferences](#) "re-imagining" them.

It also led to a series of [academic](#) and [technical papers](#) promoting the potential of smart cities to be beneficial during a pandemic by tracking travel patterns using [cellphone data](#), facilitating delivery start-ups, using the IoT to create the "[antivirus-built environment](#)," using AI and big data to [control and predict virus outbreaks](#) and generally "seizing the moment to 'build back better' and re-imagine cities that are more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable," according to the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#).

Smart city pilot projects continue to proliferate. In Japan, Toyota is building [Woven City](#), a 175-acre prototype, where people and things are completely connected through data and sensors. The project will test new technologies, such as automated driving, robotics and [AI](#) in a "real-world environment."

Researchers are studying residents of neighborhoods in [Helsinki](#) and [Amsterdam](#) who added smart technology to their homes and using the information to help with the development of "experimental innovation platforms."

Even small towns like [Cary, North Carolina](#), have turned themselves into smart cities by deploying IoT sensors that "collect data and enable analytics to provide actionable insights" across the entire city.

In Busan, South Korea, [The New York Times reported](#) Tuesday, 54 families are subjecting every aspect of their lives to data collection so developers can use their behavior as a basis to build a smart city "from the ground up."

Big Tech turning LA into a 'data farm'

The DOT awarded several Smart grants to LA — $2 million for curb management, $2 million for event-integrated transportation ticketing, and Orange County got $1.6 million for a cloud-based transit signal system.

The seemingly banal concept of "[curb management](#)," Bloomberg reported, "has become a focus of serious attention from some of the world's leading technology companies."

It is a hot development site for smart city startups like [Coord](#), a spinoff of Sidewalk Labs, as cities seek to digitize, track and regulate curb space sought after by the private transportation network of the smart city — scooters, bikes, delivery drivers, Uber drivers, etc.

The other projects are directly tied to LA's plan to host the 2028 summer Olympics. In fact, these projects fit into LA's [SmartLA 2028 city plan](#), developed by the city's [Information Technology Agency](#) and first released by former Mayor Eric Garcetti, LA's first "[high tech mayor](#)'" in December 2020 as a plan to "leverage technology to meet urban challenges."

The plan to "turn L.A. from reliance on fossil fuels and cars and into a data-driven connected city," felt like a far-off scenario when first released, according to Zillow founder and smart city promoter Spencer Rascoff.

But, he wrote on his website, "It took that pandemic to throw everyone into a [digital-ready future](#) earlier than (everyone) expected. But here we are."

The 54-page strategy document, released in 2020, was revisited this month at the [Smart Cities for a Better Future conference](#) in LA this month.

Attorney [Ray Flores](#), who attended the conference, said the plan was unrealistic, to say the least:

"This smart city is being billed as a panacea for all that ails, or should I say plagues, Los Angeles, with the flip of a switch. That will never happen."

Worse, Flores said, the city is using the Olympics to justify the implementation of draconian technologies:

"As host to the 2028 Olympic Games, LA28 is positioning itself for further tyranny by moving the compliance ball forward on an even grander, citywide scale for the world to see."

SmartLA 2028 outlines in broad strokes a vision for the city that Olympics consumers will visit — a smart city for LA to compete in a digital economy.

Attorney [Greg Glaser](#), who studied the plan, told [The Defender](#):

"They suggest in this document that smart city technology is needed because LA residents are victims, victims of COVID and victims of racial injustice. The idea is that they need to push this smart city to compete in a digital economy and because LA residents are victims.

"The practical result is redirecting LA residents' dollars to fund [Big Tech](#), and Big Tech will monitor LA residents 24/7 in increasingly dystopian ways, and the strategy document specifies that on a timeline.

"Each year, the technology becomes more advanced, more integrated, and LA is collecting more data on these residents, effectively turning LA into a data farm."

According to the plan, SmartLA will be built on a citywide [5G infrastructure](#) — the first in the U.S. — with ubiquitous ultra-high-speed 5G connectivity across the city.

The city will use the 5G infrastructure to make an "[L.A. City Data Lake](#)" for departments and machines to talk to one another and to bring together all of the IoT sensor data from across the city.

That infrastructure will make it possible, among other things, for residents to use "a single, digital payment platform" for public and "micro" transit options.

The city will use "ethical, proactive technology" that will identify crises like fire, violence, "or other risks to the health and safety of L.A. residents," which it will do "even before" they need to call 9-1-1.

Homes will be equipped with proprietary software, such as Amazon Echo, Google Home or Apple Siri, that they will use to access public city services, including library content. People also will be able to use those tools to talk to multi-lingual chatbots, who will use AI to answer all of their questions.

There will be automatic traffic control, GPS-enabled street sweepers and smart street lamps, which in San Diego are equipped with cameras that feed data to police departments, cameras and IoT sensors across the city to detect and make decisions about "traffic, crime, pollution, potholes and graffiti."

The city will use Robotic Process Automation to process city documents and blockchain technology for "smart contracting."

And the city will be the economic epicenter of a new startup ecosystem, according to the plan.

COVID-19, according to the SmartLA 2028 city plan, showed that "digital tools have emerged as a critical lifeline for our society — enabling contact-free essential services, accelerated medical solutions, Artificial Intelligence (AI)-assisted policymaking, protest coordination through social media, real-time community engagement and a scale and pace of innovation previously unthinkable."

To address privacy and other concerns, LA will adopt a digital code of ethics to ensure there is no unethical use of digital technology, such as facial recognition, and to make sure there is equitable access to all of these services.

The strategy document will guide "this digital transformation for the City of Los Angeles to accelerate our recovery in the near term, improve quality of life for all Angelenos in the long term, and establish the Smart City infrastructure necessary to effectively host the Summer 2028 Olympics and Paralympics."

'A dragnet of surveillance infrastructure'

French President Emmanuel Macron similarly pushed for the introduction of AI-powered surveillance systems for the 2024 Paris Olympics. Earlier this year, when the French Senate approved new mass surveillance powers in advance of the Olympics, the Senate's law committee rejected a proposed amendment that would have allowed for facial recognition.

But Amnesty International warns that any AI-powered digital surveillance will violate privacy rights and expand police powers by "broadening the government's arsenal of surveillance equipment, permanently."

"Re-stocking security apparatus with AI-driven mass surveillance is a dangerous political project which could lead to broad violations of human rights," said Agnes Callamard, Amnesty International's secretary general.

"Every action in a public space will get sucked into a dragnet of surveillance infrastructure, undermining fundamental civic freedoms," she added.

Amnesty International reported that under the new AI-powered, mass surveillance measures, such as Closed Caption Television, cameras and drones at the games, will capture data from everyone on public transport or in stadiums. It will allow officials to identify "abnormal" or "suspicious" activity.

Callamard said:

"These overly broad definitions set by officials to categorize 'suspicious' and 'abnormal' activities in crowds are highly concerning. We must ask ourselves some urgent questions: Who sets the norm for what is 'normal'?

"Officials who control the designations of 'abnormal or suspicious' activities in societies also have the power to exacerbate a chilling effect on dissent and protest, and to supercharge discrimination against communities already targeted."

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