
The Columbus Dispatch

Columbus to pause Flock camera program after evidence of misuse

Jordan LairdBailey GallionColumbus Dispatch

Updated Sept. 3, 2026, 1:45 p.m. ET

Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther has paused the city's use of Flock Safety license plate readers due to evidence of possible misuse by an officer.

The officer is under investigation for searching a single license plate hundreds of times for personal reasons.

The indefinite pause comes after a USA TODAY network investigation flagged suspicious searches in Columbus and across the country.

Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther is pausing the city's use of [Flock Safety license plate readers](#) and bagging the cameras over what he described as "deeply troubling" misuse of the surveillance technology, days after The Dispatch flagged an officer's suspicious search history.

Ginther announced on Sept. 3 in a press conference that he directed the city's Department of Public Safety to investigate an officer found to have made hundreds of searches of a license plate with no apparent law enforcement connection. The Columbus Division of Police will undergo a third-party audit of its use of Flock to identify any further misuses of the technology the city has had access to since 2023. If any

criminal wrongdoing is uncovered, Ginther said officers could face charges.

Officer Melvin Tellis, a police officer on the City Council Executive Protection Unit who joined the force in 2017, searched the same license plate number "hundreds of times" for personal reasons, Police Chief Elaine Bryant said. Bryant said she first learned of the searches on Sept. 1, the day after The Dispatch first began asking questions about Tellis' search history flagged as suspicious in a [USA TODAY database](#).

Tellis has been relieved of duty during the investigation, Ginther said. Columbus Division of Police personnel who are relieved of duty must turn in their gun, badge and other equipment, and are given a paid desk assignment at police headquarters, the division said previously.

"What I have learned has shaken my trust," Ginther said. "I am angry. I am disappointed. and there must be accountability."

While the city indefinitely pauses using Flock data, the city will put bags over the 65 Flock Safety automated license plate readers that Columbus has a contract for around the city, a spokesperson for Ginther later confirmed. Flock Safety owns and operates the AI-powered cameras. Other cities like Dayton have used bags to blind their cameras to be sure they don't continue collecting data.

"Until I can report out to the people of Columbus that this isn't a more widespread issue, that this really is just one person or a few people misusing and abusing this technology, I can't with confidence ask them to trust us with this thing," Ginther said.

Even with Columbus pausing its program, there are hundreds of cameras across central Ohio contracted by [private businesses](#), [schools](#) and suburbs.

Tellis searched for a single license plate more than 270 times over about 14 months between November 2023 and December 2024, records show. The reasons for the search given were generally vague and included reasons like "location."

Columbus police are investigating the searches. Bryant declined to provide details about the license plate he searched but said police don't think the searches were law enforcement related.

Bryant said she respects the mayor's decision to pause the use of Flock cameras and it is the right decision at this time, although she emphasized the technology has helped officers solve crimes.

"My advocacy around this technology has never been around a service provider. It has always been about people who depend on us to keep them safe, about giving our officers and investigators the tools they

need to do their job," Bryant said. "But with that technology, comes a responsibility to use it appropriately."

City Council is expected to [consider further actions to regulate](#) the use of license plate cameras like Flock later this month. Breaking with the mayor's stance, a majority of city council members have [expressed interest in ending the Flock program](#), as exclusively reported by The Dispatch last week.

"I have been clear that a nonnegotiable, necessary ingredient of public safety is public trust and I believe Flock has lost that trust," said City Council President Shannon Hardin. "We as a city can't stay on autopilot while these technologies evolve faster than our policies do, so as we've said, we intend to legislate on this topic this month. Choosing between public safety and personal privacy isn't binary. I believe we can do both in ways that work to keep the public safe while always protecting their civil liberties."

A council spokesperson said council supports the investigation "wherever it goes." Council first learned of the investigation on Sept. 1, the spokesperson said, and deferred questions to Columbus police about officers assigned to council protection, of which there are four including Tellis.



Although Columbus police have had Flock cameras for multiple years, the division conducted its [first audit of the system](#) this summer, which was focused on finding possibly immigration enforcement related searches, something Columbus leaders oppose using the data for.

Also in recent months, the city has paired back sharing city Flock data with other law enforcement agencies and instituted new restrictions and safeguards, as recently as Aug. 28. The Division of Police has said it would announce a new central policy governing all Division sensor systems on Sept. 4.

"This has been a learning process," said Deputy Police Chief Tim Myers. "We want to create robust systems that can spot potential misuse early."

The Dispatch is part of the USA TODAY network, which [released an investigation](#) last week into possible stalking and other misuse cases of Flock's cameras that led to at least 19 law enforcement officers across the country getting arrested, fired, put on leave or investigated. The USA TODAY investigation includes a search tool that identifies potentially suspicious searches.

A spokesperson for Flock Safety told The Dispatch that audit records have been built into the platform since the beginning and have been strengthened over time. By the end of 2026, an audit assistance tool that surfaces atypical activity early will be required for all law enforcement customers. The spokesperson said Flock Safety is also implementing a feature that would proactively lockout users whose activity is abnormal.

Ginther said Flock cameras have been used to solve violent crime, recover stolen vehicles and find missing and endangered people. But if Tellis made the searches he is accused of making, he violated the public's "sacred trust" in its police force, he said.

"This is an incredibly important piece of technology," Ginther said, echoing other recent statements he has made in support of the cameras. "It has saved lives. But we have to be thoughtful, careful."

Ginther said he will "fight like hell for this technology," but it must be used in a way that maintains the public's trust.



Columbus' move to pause using Flock cameras comes less than a month after two [Reynoldsburg police officers resigned](#) while under investigation for possible misuse of Flock technology.

Previously, on Sept. 1, Ginther insisted in a press conference that he didn't want to take this powerful tool away from Columbus police.

"This technology is saving lives and I'm not going to take tools away from law enforcement who are doing incredible work," Ginther said. "The chief is more than open to continue to put more safeguards in place but we are not going to put the people of Columbus at risk by taking this technology and this tool away from law enforcement."



When Ginther and Columbus police [announced additional safeguards on the technology](#) on Aug. 28, they said Flock data has been used in 60% of recent homicide arrests.

Brian Steel, president of Fraternal Order of Police Capital City Lodge #9, said he was "disappointed" to learn that the Flock program is being paused. He said he believes the city should continue using the

technology because it has proved effective in solving violent crimes, vehicle thefts and missing person cases, but should do so with more guardrails, like updated policies and proactive audits. If Flock as a company is too controversial, the city should use a different service, he added.

"I'm disappointed that the division is going to lose a tool that is proven to assist with solving violent crime," Steel said. "This technology is not going away."

Ginther said he did not make the decision to pause using Flock cameras lightly.

"We cannot ignore the consequences of taking an effective public safety tool away," Ginther said. "Those consequences are not theoretical. They will not be felt equally across Columbus. There are neighborhoods in our city that have borne the brunt of violence for far too long."

Dispatch reporter Anna Lynn Winfrey contributed to this report.

This breaking news story has been updated with the latest information.