



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on December 19, 2012

City After City, Buses Are Being Bugged by Big Brother

If you ride public transportation, watch what you say. In city after city, transit authorities are installing sophisticated surveillance equipment to record every word spoken by riders.

An [article published by Wired](#) reveals that buses and subways around the country are being equipped with the spy apparatuses.

Where are so many cities — many of which are notoriously suffering from budget shortfalls — getting the money to monitor citizens? The Department of Homeland Security.



According to [a story from The Daily](#) cited in the *Wired* report, DHS is sending grants to municipalities to pay for the purchase and installation of the surveillance equipment.

“In San Francisco, the Department of Homeland Security is funding the entire cost with a grant. Elsewhere, the federal government is also providing some financial support. Officials in Concord, N.C., for example, used part of a \$1.2 million economic stimulus grant to install a combined audio and video surveillance system on public transit vehicles, records show,” writes Michael Brick in *The Daily*.

Surveillance stimulus. From Fusion Centers to [the Buffer Zone Protection Program](#), Homeland Security is setting up the preliminary infrastructure that will support the conversion of states and cities into nothing more than administrative outposts of the federal government’s domestic spying center.

Government use of these recording devices seems to infringe on the Fourth Amendment’s protection against searches (including of conversations) without probable cause. The [Fourth Amendment states](#):

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.

Additionally, when combined with GPS data sent by the buses to remote servers, passenger locations and movements can be tracked by those with access to the data received from the microphones and cameras mounted in the buses.

Wired describes the technology powering the surveillance: “The RoadRecorder 7000 surveillance system being marketed for use on public buses consists of a high-definition IP camera and audio recording system that can be configured remotely via built-in web server.” Moreover:

According to the [product pamphlet for the RoadRecorder 7000 system made by SafetyVision](#) (.pdf), “Remote connectivity to the RoadRecorder 7000 NVR can be established via the Gigabit Ethernet port or the built-in 3G modem. A robust software ecosystem including LiveTrax vehicle tracking and video streaming service combined with SafetyNet central management system allows authorized users to check health status, create custom alerts, track vehicles, automate event



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downloads and much more.”

The systems use cables or WiFi to pair audio conversations with camera images in order to produce synchronous recordings. Audio and video can be monitored in real-time, but are also stored onboard in blackbox-like devices, generally for 30 days, for later retrieval. Four to six cameras with mics are generally installed throughout a bus, including one near the driver and one on the exterior of the bus.

As of press time, seven cities are in the process of buying or installing these devices: San Francisco, California; Eugene, Oregon; Traverse City, Michigan; Columbus, Ohio; Baltimore, Maryland; Hartford, Connecticut; and Athens, Georgia.

In San Francisco, the entire cost of the installation of the system on 357 of the city’s buses and trolley cars — \$5.9 million — was paid for by a DHS grant. Reportedly, the contract provides for monitors to be placed in 600 additional public transportation vehicles.

DHS doled out taxpayer money to city managers in Concord, North Carolina, as well. In Concord, \$1.2 million in federal “stimulus grant” money went to equip its buses with the powerful new surveillance gear, which includes both audio and video components.

Sound and picture will also be recorded on buses in Eugene, Oregon. Wired writes:

In Eugene, Oregon, the *Daily* found, transit officials requested microphones that would be capable of “distilling clear conversations from the background noise of other voices, wind, traffic, windshields wipers and engines” and also wanted at least five audio channels spread across each bus that would be “paired with one or more camera images and recorded synchronously with the video for simultaneous playback.”

When contacted for comment, transit authorities in Concord claim the new technology will help keep passengers safe and give drivers a way to help law enforcement identify troublemakers.

Officials in Baltimore, Maryland also hid behind the “public safety” shield when public opposition arose to that city’s bus surveillance program.

As with so many violations of the constitutionally protected civil liberties of law-abiding Americans, the government officials abrogating these rights shield their statist schemes behind the unassailable shroud of safety.

In [a story published in October in the *Baltimore Sun*](#), it was reported that the Maryland Transit Administration has installed microphones in 10 buses to record passenger conversations. The microphones — which the city plans to install in 330 more buses by next summer — are attached to the existing video surveillance system monitoring the city’s public transportation.

“We want to make sure people feel safe, and this builds up our arsenal of tools to keep our patrons safe,” said Ralign Wells, MTA administrator, in the *Baltimore Sun* article. “The audio completes the information package for investigators and responders,” he added.

Per Wells’ statement to the *Sun*, Maryland [Attorney General Douglas F. Gansler](#) approved the surveillance scheme.

According to coverage of the [story provided by Natural News](#), Gansler’s ruling was based on a state appeals court decision from 2000 wherein an administrative judicial panel ruled such surveillance did not violate state wiretapping laws.



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In response to the roll out of the listening devices, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) reminded Marylanders concerned about the recording of their private conversations that a similar program “was rejected in 2009 by the state’s highest-ranking transportation official and by the General Assembly on three occasions.”

The Sun quotes David Rocah, staff attorney with the Maryland chapter of the ACLU. “People don’t want or need to have their private conversations recorded by MTA as a condition of riding a bus,” Rocah said. “A significant number of people have no viable alternative to riding a bus, and they should not be forced to give up their privacy rights.”

In addition to the statement of the MTA administrator quoted above, state legislator Melvin Stukes, chief sponsor of one of the bills the ACLU rightly reports were rejected by lawmakers, is [quoted in the USA Today](#) flogging the safety excuse. “This is not your bathroom. This is not your bedroom,” Stukes said. “I’m just trying to clean up problems (and) provide a more congenial, more cordial ride.”

The story in *The Daily* paints an intimidating picture of what a passenger on any of these surveillance equipped buses can expect:

“It’s one thing to post cops[;] it’s quite another to say we will have police officers in every seat next to you, listening to everything you say,” said Neil Richards, a professor at Washington University School of Law. With the microphones, he said, “you have a policeman in every seat with a photographic memory who can spit back everything that was said.”

From Washington to your hometown, government officials are stretching the surveillance net to cover all Americans and to place every citizen under the never-blinking eye of Big Brother so that no act of defiance will escape recognition and reprisal.



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