



CAPCR Shout Out

By John Chasnoff
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Lack of transparency in city government is eroding our democracy. Here's a tale of woe about my recent attempts to pry information out of St. Louis city government, and the red flags I found along the way.

Back in October the mayor's office released a [statement](#) about a new project it was undertaking:

"October 16, 2017

The City of St. Louis is joining the federal Smart Cities Initiative, an effort that encourages cities across the country to use technology to modernize the way the City tackles everyday problems and improve the quality of life for all of its residents.

The Smart City efforts in St. Louis will focus on achieving four main goals: improving public safety, making City services more efficient, equitable delivery of City services, and expanding internet access for every St. Louisan..."

The announcement caught my eye because Smart Cities has been long associated with technological surveillance (*ala* the Real Time Intelligence Center [RTIC]) -- and with predictive policing, which is an attempt to use algorithms to predict where, when and by whom future crimes will be committed.

Suffice it to say I'm strongly opposed to both. Projects like the RTIC are expensive, threaten privacy rights and have not proven to be effective.

Predictive policing is highly vulnerable to amplifying existing racial injustices through reliance on statistics garnered from disparate treatment in the past.

So, I wanted to find out more about the federal Smart Cities Initiative we were joining.

Turns out it's a 2015 Obama program assisting "new technologies that can help make our cities more inhabitable, cleaner, and more equitable." That sounds good. It captures the positives that technological innovation might bring, but Obama, who for instance went after Edward Snowden, was never good on government surveillance issues. Who knows what Trump may have done with the program.

The feds give away millions of dollars to further "Smart Cities," so maybe St. Louis would have some grant money coming our way...or maybe we were joining the info-sharing Better Communities Alliance. The mayor's press release hadn't said.

I did a Sunshine request to see what is in our application and what sort of deal had been struck.

The answer came back: "No responsive document."

Are you telling me that we joined a federal initiative without asking to join and with no formal commitments or explanations from either party? That's hard to believe.

Still, the Sunshine response held out some hope for me. It directed me to contact a particular person at the St. Louis Development Corporation, if I wanted to know more.

That was another dead end. I've emailed and called for a week and a half with no response.

Frustrated, I contacted some 'higher-ups' in the mayor's office, telling them my plight and offering my opinion that this was an unhealthy state of affairs. This new initiative was difficult to track, making it for all intents and purposes undocumented and opaque.

That was four days ago, with a follow up phone call after my emails. No response.

So, what the heck is this Smart Cities program and what does it mean for the City of St. Louis?

Was it just hype? Is the city getting some money and not telling the community how it will be spent? Can we expect greater "equity" as promised or more government spying?

The original mayoral statement promised a community advisory committee to help make plans, but with so little regard for the community so far, what can we hope for on this front?

The mayor's statement also promised a new Officer of Technology; that position has been posted, so we seem to be progressing with plans of some sort.

With this kind of start, pardon me if my expectations are low. In fact, those expectations are tilting toward dread.

After more than three weeks of unrequited effort, I'm going to try another Sunshine request. Maybe answers are buried in someone's emails or other communications I didn't ask for explicitly enough.

I'll let you know what I find out.