

DATABASES

Amid backlash, this Central Mass. police department is standing by Flock cameras

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Worcester Telegram & Gazette

Sept. 25, 2026, 3:28 p.m. ET

Key Points

The Charlton police are the only police department in Worcester County known to have active Flock cameras.

Police departments in several nearby communities have recently discontinued the cameras' use.

The Charlton Select Board is joining the Police Department in resisting calls to end the town's contract with Flock.

CHARLTON – Charlton police are launching a public information campaign in an attempt to hold onto their contract with the controversial surveillance corporation Flock Safety. The department, one of the last in the county to employ Flock cameras, is looking to install more.

[In a now-familiar debate](#) that has been waged across the state and nation, some residents are pushing town leadership to do away with the automated license plate readers, citing privacy concerns [and the proliferation of abuse](#).

The American Civil Liberties Union has pushed for more transparency and limitations on automated license plate readers.

"I more recently started reading about the technology and learning more and more. I've watched so many places cancel it and I'm wondering why we're expanding it," said resident Brian Powers, who was born and raised in Charlton and moved back to the town four years ago, in an interview with the Telegram & Gazette.

Lt. Anthony Gribbons said that while he understands where critics are coming from, the department's four active cameras have allowed it to solve crimes more effectively and efficiently. He said the department is holding off on installing the four additional cameras it has ordered until tensions have calmed.

Police departments in [Auburn](#), [Grafton](#), Douglas, Boylston and Stow have all discontinued their use of Flock cameras, which capture a vehicle's license plate numbers and other identifiable characteristics – such as make, model and color – and accessories like bike racks.

A map from [WCVB-TV](#), citing ACLU data, shows Webster as having an active contract with the surveillance corporation.

Webster Police Chief Michael Shaw told the T&G that Flock cameras were never installed in town, though the department had access to the company's database to search for a vehicle. Shaw said the department's contract with Flock ends soon and would not be renewed.

The T&G did not identify any other police departments in Worcester County that still use Flock cameras.

A group of residents are now urging Charlton police, who signed a contract with Flock Safety in 2023 and installed the four cameras in late 2024, to follow suit and discontinue the cameras.

However, Charlton police and the Select Board do not appear poised to forfeit the technology, saying constituents need to learn more about the cameras' capabilities and limitations. The department is conducting public demonstrations to give opponents an inside look into the Flock database in an effort to change their minds.

"It's really misinformation," said Stephan Koronis, chairman of the Select Board, of citizens' resistance. "I think it's a powerful tool," he said, adding that "police can't be everywhere all at once."

Michelle Chalmers, who has helped organize the opposition efforts and supports the local police, said she found it "condescending and disrespectful" to imply she didn't understand the technology.

The issue came to a head when the department ordered four more cameras, prompting Chalmers to collect 160 signatures to petition Select Board to vote on the town's contract with Flock at [its Sept. 22 meeting](#).

However, the petition was nonbinding and the governing body voted to take no action. The group now has its sights set on the [Special Town Meeting](#) in October, where it hopes the Select Board will be forced to answer to voters' opposition, according to Chalmers.

In the meantime, Gribbons is inviting residents to come to the police station and see the technology for themselves. He extended the same invitation to the T&G, offering a behind-the-scenes look into Flock's database.

An inside look into the Flock database

A reporter visited the Charlton Police Department on Thursday, Sept. 24.

Gribbons began by logging into his Flock account with an email address and password. Multifactor authentication was required.

Every police officer in Charlton has access to the database, according to Gribbons. Their unique credentials allow the department to log and audit the queries made by each officer. Flock will flag searches it deems suspicious.

To search for a vehicle, an officer is first required to enter offense type and case number, the demonstration showed. Offense type is selected from a drop-down menu that includes options such as kidnapping/abduction, larceny and child abuse/neglect, and over a dozen more.

While the drop-down menu does include an option for immigration enforcement, Gribbons explained that if any officer or outside agency selected that option an

error would appear, per Charlton's specific contract with Flock. Officers also cannot query the data in relation to a driver's violation of abortion laws in other states, Gribbons said.

The lieutenant, who has over two decades of law enforcement experience, did a demo where he searched his own cruiser's license plate over the last 30 days. About a half a dozen images appeared, showing his vehicle passing by one of the town's cameras on Stafford Street.

In many pictures, it was difficult to see inside the car or identify Gribbons as the driver. In one image you could make out a white man in the driver's seat.

Other images included pedestrians in the background, which could render description of their clothing, though their faces were not in focus.

An officer can also query the Flock database using a description of a vehicle if the license plate number is not known. To do so, selections are made from a variety of drop-down menus that include vehicle description, such as motorcycle or pickup truck; and make, such as Chevy or Ford.

Other selections include color and characteristics such as toolbox, window stickers or top rack. Gribbons explained that he can only search for the existence of a bumper sticker, not by the sticker's specific characteristics.

Several outside agencies, including a police department in Texas, have queried Charlton's data. Audits showed the name of the agency and the selected reason for searching, though the specific officer's name was not included.

Gribbons said if he had any reason to suspect the searches were inappropriate he would call the agency.

Charlton police have dozens of pending requests from other police departments to share data. Gribbons said the requests are reviewed on a case-by-case basis

depending on the area's proximity to Charlton or connections along well trafficked routes.

The database currently stores data for 30 days, though Flock is considering limiting the storage time.

Gribbons gave several hypotheticals for when the technology is useful, including to track down a elderly person with dementia who left in the family car.

Chalmers said she sat through the demonstration with Gribbons and it only increased her concerns, especially the data sharing with outside agencies.

"Who is looking at us and what are they using that information for? Who can this technology end up in the hands of? That's what scares me and makes me very cautious about this type of surveillance," she said.

"What's wrong with being cautious?"

Chalmers added that her mistrust lies with federal agencies that may have access to the data, noting actions of the Trump administration.

The majority of the five-member Select Board was far more swayed by the training, with Koronis saying at the Sept. 22 Select Board meeting that after seeing the database up close he is "convinced it's not a threat."

Select Board clerk Michael Kavorkian pointed at the example of the Brown University shooter, Claudio Neves Valente, who was tracked down in part [using Flock technology](#).

Chalmers and Powers are undeterred, buoyed by successes in surrounding towns that have severed ties with Flock.

"The Select Board works for the community," Chalmers said. "Whatever your position, this decision deserves an informed public conversation."

