

BAY AREA

Oakland council agrees to keep gunshot-detection system

By **David Hernandez**, Breaking News Reporter

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The Oakland City Council agreed to keep the city's ShotSpotter system that alerts police about gunshots fired in the city. Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

After a passionate debate about the value of ShotSpotter, the Oakland City Council approved Tuesday a new contract for the network of sensors that alerts police to

gunshots.

While other cities have decided to ditch ShotSpotter, the Oakland City Council voted 7-1 to keep the technology through at least September. The contract with SoundThinking, the company behind ShotSpotter, will include two automatic one-year renewals with the option for the council to cancel it. The technology costs about \$830,000 a year.

The vote came after Councilmember Carroll Fife pushed the options to cancel the contract instead of a three-year, \$2.5 million contract.

“I want to make sure if we are putting this money out in a deficit, that we’re getting a return,” Fife said.

ShotSpotter uses microphone-equipped sensors to detect gunshots and triangulate where the rounds were fired. Alerts with that information are sent to dispatchers and officers.

Police officials, SoundThinking representatives and some community members say they believe the technology saves lives. They also say the alerts lead officers to scenes where they find and collect guns and other evidence, and that the technology provides valuable intel on shootings.

But some community members say they believe the technology does little to solve shootings or deter gun violence. They believe the city, which faces a historic deficit, should instead fund community-led efforts that address root causes to prevent shootings, such as housing and mental health programs.

In April, Oakland’s Privacy Advisory Commission, a citizen group that offers input on technologies, urged the city in a 4-2 vote to do away with ShotSpotter and divert

the funds to other police resources. Chair Brian Hofer advocated for the crime lab.

“We have to consider the possibility we chose the wrong tool,” Hofer said Tuesday during public comments. “The problem is we’re not actually addressing gun violence more effectively. That’s the issue.”

Perhaps the cost wouldn’t be an issue if the city wasn’t in a budget crisis, Hofer said.

Oakland Police Deputy Chief Frederick Shavies told the council “it is imperative we leverage technology,” especially because the city faces a budget deficit and limited resources.

Melissa Dooher, SoundThinking’s senior director of forensics and litigation support and a former Alameda County prosecutor and Oakland resident, implored the council to keep the technology to fight gun violence and save lives.

“ShotSpotter is worth keeping,” Dooher said. “It would be such a shame to do away with something that works.”

Councilmember Treva Reid said many residents who support ShotSpotter live in communities with the highest rates of shootings, and to ignore their voices would be disrespectful. “We need to invest in more technologies and tools, and leverage them,” she said.

Councilmember Kevin Jenkins said he believes the contract is worth it if it saves a life. He estimated he has heard hundreds of possible gunshots, but never has called police because he has been unsure whether the sounds were fireworks or where the sounds came from. He characterized ShotSpotter as a tool in the city’s tool bag to address gun violence.

Councilmember Janani Ramachandran said she's skeptical about police's ability to effectively use ShotSpotter, given the department's low staffing and slow response times. She added that she didn't support its continued use given the city's budget deficit.

"There's so much more that I believe we could do with that money" to address gun violence, Ramachandran said.

ShotSpotter covers about 32% of the city, with many of the sensors placed in areas in East and West Oakland where many shootings occur, according to police.

ShotSpotter's accuracy rate in Oakland was 99% last year, according to police and SoundThinking. Inaccurate alerts include notifications for sounds that were not gunshots and inaccurate locations of gunshots.

Last year, ShotSpotter sent Oakland police 8,317 alerts, though multiple alerts are sometimes tied to the same incident. Officers took 1,870 reports as a result of the alerts last year, according to police and SoundThinking data. (In 2020, there were 6,716 alerts and 1,526 reports. In 2022, there were 7,562 alerts and 1,789 reports.)

Last year's cases included 29 homicides and 170 shootings of victims who survived. No one called police to report 113 of the victims who survived, according to police and SoundThinking.

In 181 instances, vehicles and homes were struck by gunfire. Most of the cases — 1,244 — were deemed negligent shootings, which include instances when someone fires a gun in the air.

Officers made 74 arrests as a result of the alerts last year, down from 252 in 2020 and 105 in 2022, according to police and SoundThinking data.

Officers recovered 99 guns, up from 69 in 2020 and 83 in 2022, according to the data.

While more than 170 cities in the U.S. use ShotSpotter, according to SoundThinking, some cities are ditching the technology. Houston’s mayor, John Whitmire, who called ShotSpotter a “gimmick,” said he wants the city to scrap the technology. The city’s contract expires in 2027.

Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson successfully pushed for the city to drop ShotSpotter last month despite opposition from a majority of the City Council. Johnson said he wants the city to explore “better options that save more lives” and deter violent crime, though some city leaders and community members recently called on him to revive the program.

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BREAKING NEWS REPORTER



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