**New Baltimore Aerial Surveillance Program Raises Trust Issues**

Small planes outfitted with video cameras have been flying over Baltimore since January, capturing activity on the streets below and relaying the footage to police to help them catch criminals.

The public knew nothing about it until this week — when Bloomberg Businessweek ran a cover story about the trial program. The revelations triggered outrage from elected officials, defense lawyers and the American Civil Liberties Union, who said the program raised privacy concerns and could aggravate public distrust in a city that exploded in riots last year after the death of a man in police custody.

"Widespread surveillance violates every citizens' right to privacy; the lack of disclosure about this practice and the video that has been captured further violates the rights of our clients who may have evidence supporting their innocence that is kept secret," Paul DeWolfe, the Public Defender for Maryland said in a statement earlier this week.

The response put Baltimore, where tensions between law enforcement and minority neighborhoods run high, on the edge of the debate about police use of rapidly evolving technology. It also raises questions about whether enhanced surveillance techniques are worth the cost in public perception.

After Baltimore's homicide rate spiked last year, residents demanded the police do more and be creative, T.J. Smith, a Baltimore police department spokesman told NBC News. So law enforcement began a trial run of an aerial surveillance program which, officials now say, was funded by anonymous donors through a private philanthropic foundation.

Smith cited three shootings — two fatal — in which the aerial surveillance has helped provide key leads. The trial is nearly over, Smith said; it will be used to investigate street crime and in the Baltimore Marathon in October.

"The only people that should be nervous and fearful are the criminals," Smith said.

Smith said the agency was sensitive to those issues, and to how the new surveillance could be perceived. He said the department was "committed to being transparent."

He acknowledged that police officials did not discuss whether to inform the public before the program began in January.

Before telling the public, the department wanted to wait and see if the program — which remains on a trial run — produced promising results while keeping criminals unaware, Smith said.

"We can't publicly reveal every tool used to stop these trigger-pullers," he said.

Full article at: http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/new-baltimore-aerial-surveillance-program-raises-trust-issues-n638496