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Cambridge got ShotSpotter wrong

The City Council framed ShotSpotter as a civil-liberties threat but overlooked its narrow purpose: detecting gunfire quickly enough to help save lives.

By **Tim Flaherty and E. Denise Simmons** Updated May 21, 2026, 1 hour ago



In this 2021 file photo, ShotSpotter equipment in Chicago. CHARLES REX ARBOGAST/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Tim Flaherty and E. Denise Simmons are members of the Cambridge City Council.

Cambridge likes to think of itself as a city that follows the evidence. But in the debate over ShotSpotter, a gunshot detection service, the City Council has

done the opposite. It has elevated ideology over facts, amplified worst-case fears, and rejected a tool that could help save lives.

ShotSpotter is not a camera network. It is not facial recognition. It does not record conversations, track individuals, or build personal profiles. It detects acoustic signatures consistent with gunfire in public spaces and sends alerts to police, often within seconds — including in cases where no one calls 911.

That matters. A significant share of gunfire goes unreported. People may stay silent out of fear, confusion, or mistrust. But the absence of a 911 call does not mean the absence of danger. It means the absence of a response.

Cambridge is a relatively safe city, but it is not immune from gun violence. In recent years, shootings and gun-related incidents involving youth from Cambridge and neighboring Somerville have shaken neighborhoods and raised serious questions about response time. Even if no one is killed, the damage is real: families frightened, streets disrupted, and residents left wondering whether help will arrive in time.

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The council voted Monday — 5 in favor, 2 present, and 2 against — [to end the use of and remove ShotSpotter](#) technology in Cambridge. We voted against the end of this service. The debate has been framed as a choice between public safety and civil liberties. That framing is false. The real question is not whether Cambridge should tolerate unchecked surveillance. It should not. The question is whether a narrowly focused gunfire-detection system, governed by strict rules and public oversight, can improve emergency response without compromising constitutional rights.

If the concern is biased policing, the answer is not to reject useful

information. The answer is governance: public reporting on every alert, independent audits, clear rules of engagement, and transparent review of outcomes. Cambridge has the capacity to do this better than almost any city in the country.

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What it lacks, at the moment, is the political will.

The communities most exposed to gun violence are often the least likely to report it. Rejecting tools that detect unreported gunfire risks creating a system of public safety in which some neighborhoods do not receive an immediate response.

That point was made powerfully by Carlos Humberto David, who told the council about the 2014 killing of his younger brother, Kensley, less than a mile from City Hall. He spoke as someone who grew up in Washington Elms, a federal housing project, and as someone who said he values the importance of privacy and constitutional protections. He still testified that ShotSpotter could have helped police respond faster to locate the shooter or provide emergency medical care. Kensley's killing remains unsolved. Too many shootings remain unresolved.

That is not progressive. It is neglect dressed up as privacy.

None of this means ShotSpotter is a cure-all. It is not. It will not address the root causes of violence, and it should never replace investments in prevention, mental health, housing, and youth programs. But those are long-term strategies. When shots are fired, the need is immediate.

Cambridge saw that again when a gunman armed with an assault-style rifle [opened fire on Memorial Drive](#), wounding two people. One victim survived

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because a Cambridge police officer responded quickly and applied a tourniquet. That is what rapid response can mean in real life: the difference between bleeding to death and staying alive.

The council does not need to embrace ShotSpotter uncritically. But it does owe residents a serious, evidence-based evaluation of the service — one that acknowledges both the technology's limits and its potential value. A tightly scoped program, with strict guardrails and independent review, would be a reasonable approach. Test it. Measure it. Publish the results. Adjust accordingly.

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That is how a city committed to evidence should govern. Instead, Cambridge chose removal.

At some point, that choice becomes its own policy, with real consequences. Cambridge can continue denouncing ShotSpotter in abstract terms or it can confront the reality that even infrequent gun violence demands every response tool available.

If Cambridge is serious about saving lives while protecting civil liberties, it should apply a balancing test grounded in evidence — not slogans, false narratives, or speculative fears.

And it should start acting as if the evidence matters.