

Dear Commissioners,

I want to start off by saying that I was very encouraged in December to hear Port Commissioners calling for greater transparency and accountability in response to decisions being made about the use of facial recognition technology at SeaTac Airport.

At that meeting, Puget Sound Sage came to comment with a dozen others, and nearly 30 public comments were sent by email overwhelmingly opposed to any introduction of facial recognition technology at the Port. We urged you to defer action on a Resolution or Motion until you had fully heard from civil liberties and data surveillance experts, as well as communities most impacted by the use of unregulated technology at our Port. Instead, Commissioners moved forward with a slightly amended Motion which directed further analysis and policy development to an Internal workgroup with little to no accountability to the public.

While it is early to completely evaluate the Port's process for establishing guidelines for the use of biometrics, what we have seen so far is deeply concerning. A Biometrics External Advisory Group established in response to the public's concerns around lack of transparency and accountability has been overwhelmingly stacked with industry and agency representatives that have already expressed their interest in having facial recognition at the Port. In fact, two corporations that stand to profit directly from this decision, Microsoft and Amazon, have seats at the table. These two corporations are not obvious stakeholders at the Port AND they have a track record of lobbying in opposition to strong privacy regulations around surveillance technology. It's hard to see how the four public interest organizations serving on the External Advisory Group can effectively influence the Port's decision-making in this setting.

While we appreciate noticeable efforts by Port staff to improve transparency of the Biometrics Work Groups' activities through the website and updates at Commission meetings, it appears to be window dressing while plans for facial recognition move forward. For example, Port staff posting an RFP for Facial Recognition equipment in SeaTac's International Departures terminal before the Biometrics Workgroup has even proposed guidelines seems like business as usual.

To date, the impact of biometrics on communities of color, immigrants and refugees has not been fully explored, and you still have not received substantive feedback from the public on this issue. As such, we urge you to withdraw the RFP and not allow any further action by Port officials to lay the groundwork for facial recognition until you hold a robust public hearing dedicated to the issue of biometrics to test assumptions being made by proponents of the technology.

As we commented last time, SeaTac Airport is a critical resource to the region, to all of our communities, and to individuals who need air travel for work and family. Use of biometric technology, however, is not critical to anyone. We know that you as individual Commissioners care deeply about this issue and feel obligated to protect the public. We are asking you today to back up your commitments from the last meeting and help the public achieve clarity about what the Commission is moving forward and what you are not.

Sincerely,

Elena Perez
Organizing Director, Puget Sound Sage