

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF RAMSEY
ANOKA COUNTY
STATE OF MINNESOTA**

The Ramsey City Council conducted a City Council Work Session on Tuesday, September 8, 2026, at the Ramsey Municipal Center, 7550 Sunwood Drive NW, Ramsey, Minnesota.

Members Present: Mayor Ryan Heineman
Councilmember Kirsten Buscher
Councilmember Michael Olson
Councilmember Eric Peters
Councilmember Chris Riley
Councilmember Dan Specht
Councilmember Shanna Stewart

Also Present: City Administrator Brian Hagen
Police Chief Brad Bluml
Community Development Director Stephanie Hanson
Administrative Services Director Colleen Lasher
City Attorney Amanda Johnson

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Heineman called the City Council Work Session to order at 5:30 p.m.

2. TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

2.01: Anoka County Sheriff's Office Drone Assisted Response and Automated License Plate Reader Pilot Program

Police Chief Bluml introduced Anoka County Sheriff Brad Wise and noted that Sheriff Wise had been a valuable resource and mentor since he became Police Chief. He explained that Sheriff Wise was present to provide information regarding the Anoka County Sheriff's Office drone-assisted response and automated license plate reader (ALPR) pilot project and to allow the City Council an opportunity to discuss the technology and ask questions.

Sheriff Wise provided background on the evolution of law enforcement technology and the ongoing challenge of balancing its public-safety benefits with legitimate privacy concerns. He contrasted the limited equipment available when he began his career in 1995 with the technology incorporated into modern policing and noted that individuals also routinely provide personal information to cell phones, applications, retailers, and privately owned camera systems. He emphasized that communities must determine an appropriate balance between rejecting technology altogether and adopting every available tool.

Sheriff Wise explained that the Safe County Initiative includes drone-assisted response and expanded Automated License Plate Reader (ALPR) technology. Drone-assisted response would primarily change how quickly existing drone technology could be deployed, allowing a drone to launch when an eligible emergency call is dispatched and travel directly to the scene using GPS coordinates. He cited fire and law-enforcement incidents in which earlier aerial information could have helped responders assess the situation, determine the appropriate resources, or avoid unnecessary emergency measures such as a school lockdown. He emphasized that Minnesota law specifies when law enforcement may deploy drones and that agencies cannot launch them without an authorized purpose.

Sheriff Wise explained that Ramsey currently has eight fixed ALPR cameras that photograph vehicles traveling on public roads and record the vehicle and license plate image, date, time, and location. Ramsey recently reduced its data-retention period from 30 days to seven days. The cameras can compare license plates with law-enforcement hot files containing vehicles that are stolen, associated with crimes, or connected with missing or endangered persons. When a potential match occurs, officers must verify the information and determine whether further action is warranted. ALPR data may also assist investigations by identifying vehicles matching known descriptions that traveled through a particular location during a relevant period.

Sheriff Wise emphasized that Minnesota law significantly restricts collecting and using ALPR information. Law enforcement generally cannot use ALPR technology to monitor or track someone involved in a criminal investigation without a search warrant. However, exigent circumstances, such as locating an endangered vulnerable adult, may permit its use. State law limits the information collected to the vehicle image, license plate, date, time, and location, and the fixed cameras do not continuously follow vehicles throughout the community. Searches must have an authorized law-enforcement purpose, are logged and auditable, and the Flock Safety system includes an auditing feature designed to identify potentially suspicious search activity.

Sheriff Wise clarified that ALPRs do not perform facial recognition and that immigration enforcement is not an authorized ALPR search purpose under Minnesota law. He acknowledged that technology could potentially be misused but maintained that strong controls, auditing, training, discipline, cybersecurity protections, and prosecution when appropriate provide safeguards against abuse. He recognized residents' privacy concerns as genuine. Still, he believed Minnesota has strong protections. He encouraged communities to consider the public-safety consequences of declining useful investigative technologies, particularly when serious crimes occur, and residents expect law enforcement to use reasonable resources to identify those responsible.

Councilmember Olson asked whether the ALPR cameras were fixed directionally and whether they could zoom.

Sheriff Wise confirmed the cameras were fixed after installation and did not pan, tilt, or zoom.

Chief Bluml clarified that the City was also installing separate pan-tilt-zoom cameras in parks. Three were planned for the new waterfront/splash-pad area, with additional cameras contemplated in the 2027 budget for Central Park, Elmcrest Park, and Rivers Bend Park. Those

cameras would not perform license-plate reading but could move and zoom and could use parameters to notify officers of certain circumstances, such as an unusually large group in a park after established hours.

Councilmember Buscher asked about auditing and recalled hearing that an independent third-party audit was required.

Sheriff Wise confirmed that third-party auditing was required. He explained that Flock Safety also provided automated monitoring between formal audits to identify unusual or repetitive searches that might warrant supervisory review.

Chief Bluml added that Ramsey was approaching its required audit cycle and intended to conduct the ALPR audit at approximately the same time as its body-camera audit, using the same auditing company.

Councilmember Buscher commented that some residents' concern was not necessarily that the cameras currently issued speeding tickets but that the infrastructure might eventually be used for additional purposes if state law changed. She recognized that such a change would be a legislative matter rather than a decision the Sheriff would make.

Sheriff Wise agreed that future technological capabilities could not be predicted. He believed the realistic policy question was how government regulated technology rather than whether technological development itself could be stopped. He anticipated elected officials would repeatedly face the same fundamental question as new capabilities emerged: whether a particular public-safety benefit justified the associated privacy tradeoff. In his assessment, the current ALPR system provided sufficient safeguards to make the tradeoff reasonable.

Councilmember Buscher asked whether officers viewed ALPR images only after an authorized search or a hot-file alert, rather than continuously.

Sheriff Wise confirmed officers could not simply browse ALPR images without a legitimate purpose. He explained that his agency's system required a police case number before officers could complete a search, creating another safeguard against casual or unauthorized searches.

Councilmember Buscher asked whether officers remained responsible for evaluating a potential ALPR match rather than automatically assuming the system had correctly identified a suspect vehicle.

Sheriff Wise confirmed that officers remained responsible for making that determination. He discussed reports of erroneous ALPR matches and emphasized that law-enforcement technology was not infallible. Officers were trained to evaluate the circumstances, verify information, and use their own observations and judgment before taking enforcement action. He contrasted the technology with earlier policing practices, when officers investigating a crime involving a vaguely described vehicle might stop numerous vehicles simply because they generally matched the description. He believed modern technology substantially reduced those errors but did not eliminate the need for human judgment and accountability.

Councilmember Buscher noted that she had recently spoken with a police officer in the Dallas-Fort Worth area about ALPR technology and understood that, despite state-level controversy over funding, local governments there had elected to continue funding the technology because they considered it valuable.

Sheriff Wise acknowledged the difficult political environment surrounding the issue. He explained that the Anoka County proposal was originally envisioned as a two-year pilot project costing about \$250,000. As controversy increased, he worked within his authorized spending authority and negotiated a one-year pilot for approximately \$175,000. He explained that the pilot would allow agencies already using drones and ALPRs to coordinate resources and evaluate a countywide collaborative approach. If successful and ultimately supported by participating jurisdictions, it could evolve into the broader Safe County initiative. He emphasized that participating communities would still need substantial discussion and agreement.

Councilmember Peters asked whether the cameras were leased rather than purchased.

Sheriff Wise confirmed that the program operated as a lease arrangement. He noted that future technological upgrades or changes would require additional discussions and emphasized that an individual law-enforcement agency could not simply impose participation on a municipality. Ramsey could elect to discontinue participation if the City ultimately decided the program no longer met its needs.

Councilmember Peters asked about ownership and storage of the collected data.

Sheriff Wise explained that the data belonged to the law-enforcement agency and was stored through the vendor's cloud-based system. He acknowledged that agencies necessarily relied on contractual agreements and technical safeguards when using third-party systems, just as municipalities relied upon vendors for police reports, body-camera evidence, and numerous other governmental systems.

Councilmember Buscher asked whether the County had statistics showing how many crimes ALPR technology had solved or otherwise assisted with.

Sheriff Wise explained that law-enforcement agencies historically had not consistently tracked that information because investigative reports and criminal complaints were generally written to avoid unnecessarily revealing investigative techniques. As a result, agencies might report recovering a stolen vehicle without separately recording that an ALPR produced the lead. He acknowledged that agencies needed to improve that tracking because residents and policymakers reasonably wanted measurable information regarding the technology's effectiveness. He noted that significant examples continued to accumulate, including a recent Wright County incident in which an ALPR hot-file alert reportedly helped prevent a potential homicide.

Mayor Heineman commented that license-plate-reading technology has existed in the private sector for many years, including systems used by towing and repossession companies that can collect significant information about vehicle movements. He recognized the legitimacy of a

"slippery slope" concern about government surveillance but believed consistency mattered when evaluating privacy. He observed that individuals routinely carried cell phones capable of collecting substantially more detailed information about their location and activities than a fixed ALPR camera. He therefore had difficulty supporting the removal of a public-safety tool that could help locate missing children, stolen vehicles, or criminal suspects while accepting far more extensive private tracking through everyday personal technology. He indicated that, while generally favoring limits on government intrusion, he supported reasonable law-enforcement use of ALPR technology, subject to the safeguards described.

Chief Bluml emphasized that staff did not take the community's trust in its Police Department for granted. Officers had always been entrusted with highly sensitive access in performing their duties, including entering and checking a residence when responding to an alarm and finding an open door. Body cameras had added another layer of documentation, but the underlying responsibility to exercise judgment appropriately had always existed. He stated that the Police Department took that trust seriously and worked to maintain relationships within the community.

Chief Bluml noted that discussions about ALPRs frequently focused on major crimes, but the technology also mattered to individual victims of less-publicized offenses. He cited a recent burglary suspect traveling from Elk River into Ramsey and hit-and-run investigations in which ALPR searches could provide a lead. He reported that Ramsey's eight ALPR cameras had been used for 1,012 vehicle searches since January 1, averaging approximately 28 searches per week. He cautioned that the number of searches should not be interpreted as the number of criminal cases because a single investigation could involve numerous queries. For example, one officer conducted 13 searches while trying to identify a hit-and-run suspect vehicle from a description when the license plate was unknown.

City Administrator Hagen asked Council for policy direction regarding continued participation. He asked whether Council was generally comfortable leaving the existing cameras in place and potentially considering additional or relocated cameras as the County pilot developed, or whether members wanted additional discussion. He noted that Council could also consider a separate public open house or question-and-answer session. However, colleagues' feedback suggested such meetings elsewhere had sometimes been lengthy without producing substantial additional information.

Councilmember Riley believed Council had received useful information but was not yet in a position to provide final direction. He suggested bringing the matter back as a Council item after members had time to digest the presentation and information.

Councilmember Peters indicated that he did not believe an open house would be productive and expressed support for Chief Bluml's recommendation if the Chief considered continued use of the technology important to Ramsey.

Councilmember Buscher agreed with much of Councilmember Riley's position but believed transparency remained important. She indicated that if residents demonstrated interest in an open house, they should have an opportunity to attend, express concerns, and ask questions before Council reached a final decision.

Mayor Heineman summarized the direction to bring the matter back to Council after members had additional time to consider the information. Staff would continue monitoring public input, and no change to the City's current ALPR use was directed at that time.

Mayor Heineman recessed the Work Session at 6:57 p.m. for the regular City Council meeting.

Mayor Heineman reconvened the Work Session at 8:24 p.m.

2.02: Data Center Discussion

Community Development Director Hanson introduced the data-center discussion. She explained that staff brought the matter forward because large data centers had received increased attention and concern regarding electricity and water consumption, noise, and proximity to residential neighborhoods and schools. She referenced a recent proposal considered by the City of Elk River, where the City Council ultimately denied a data-center request and imposed a one-year moratorium while conducting additional research.

Community Development Director Hanson explained that Ramsey currently allows data centers as permitted uses within the I-1 and I-2 zoning districts. Because they are permitted uses, the City presently has no data-center-specific performance standards or ability to impose conditions through a conditional use permit. Although vacant industrial land in Ramsey was limited, enough property remained for a data center to locate within the City potentially.

Community Development Director Hanson identified three basic options for Council consideration: amend the City Code to make data centers conditional uses and establish specific design and performance standards; prohibit data centers within the applicable zoning districts; or leave the existing ordinance unchanged. She noted that making data centers conditional uses with specific standards appeared to be the most common approach among metropolitan-area communities she had reviewed. Developing appropriate standards would likely require approximately four to six months of research, consultation with other communities, and work with the City Attorney. Potential standards could address building size, water and energy consumption, and setbacks from residential properties, schools, parks, and other sensitive uses. She noted that the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency regulates noise and indicated the City could not establish standards more restrictive than applicable state requirements.

Mayor Heineman asked about the applicable MPCA noise limits and expressed concern about how a continuous sound at the allowable level might affect an adjacent neighborhood. He noted that both the volume and the location at which the sound was measured were important considerations.

Staff clarified that the applicable noise measurement was taken at the property line.

Councilmember Riley supported changing data centers from a permitted use to a conditional use. He believed requiring a conditional use permit would ensure that a proposed facility had to come before the City, allowing Council and residents to ask questions and giving the City greater control over whether a particular proposal was appropriate.

Councilmember Buscher also supported the conditional-use approach, noting that it would not close the door on data centers but would allow the City to evaluate each proposal before approving it.

Councilmember Specht preferred prohibiting data centers rather than establishing a conditional-use process.

Councilmember Olson supported allowing data centers through a conditional use permit.

Community Development Director Hanson proposed conducting additional research and returning to Council with more detailed information before staff began drafting ordinance language. She explained that this would help Council become more familiar with the issue and provide direction on the standards that should ultimately be incorporated into an ordinance. She would also work with the City Attorney.

Councilmember Buscher offered to provide examples of ordinances adopted by other communities.

Councilmember Buscher suggested that potential standards could address responsibility for necessary infrastructure improvements and energy requirements. She opposed imposing a moratorium, noting that data-center construction could provide employment and economic activity and that state regulations already addressed significant aspects of their operation. She identified water use, energy consumption, and noise as the principal concerns she had heard and believed those matters could be addressed through appropriate regulation rather than a prohibition.

Mayor Heineman summarized that a majority of Council supported directing staff to research standards for allowing data centers through a conditional use permit, with Councilmember Specht opposed to allowing the use. Staff would conduct additional research, consult with the City Attorney, and return to Council before preparing final ordinance language.

2.03: Discussion Regarding Union Contract Negotiations (Closed Session)

Mayor Heineman introduced the discussion regarding union contract negotiations and announced that the discussion would be closed to the public.

Administrative Services Director Lasher explained that the closed session would update the City Council on negotiations with the City's bargaining groups. Pursuant to Minnesota Statutes, Section 13D.03, Council reached consensus to enter closed session.

Mayor Heineman recessed the open Work Session at 8:34 p.m., to allow the City Council to meet in closed session.

Mayor Heineman reconvened the open Work Session at 9:12 p.m.

Administrative Services Director Lasher reported that the City Council met in closed session to receive a status update on negotiations with all City unions. Council directed staff to continue negotiations and bring the patrol and crime data analyst agreements forward for adoption at the next City Council meeting.

3. TOPICS FOR FUTURE DISCUSSION

3.01: Review Future Topics/ Calendar

Noted.

4. MAYOR / COUNCIL / STAFF INPUT

Noted.

5. ADJOURNMENT

The Work Session of the City Council was adjourned at 9:14 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Brian S. Hagen
City Administrator

ATTEST:

Katie M. Schmidt
City Clerk

Drafted by Sue Osbeck
TimeSaver Off Site Secretarial, Inc.