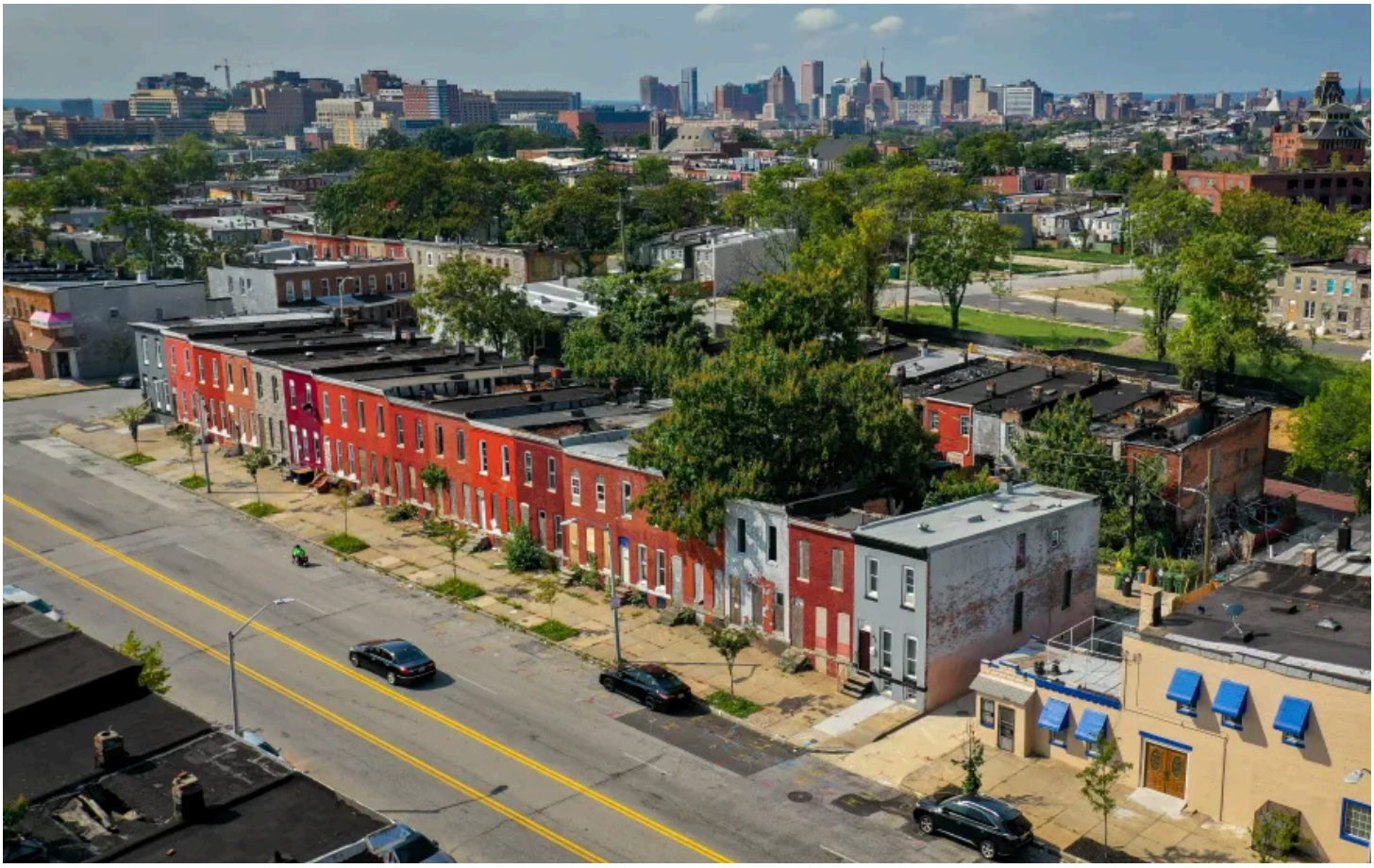
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Baltimore spending board OKs $2.1 million contract for ShotSpotter gunshot detection



Jerry Jackson/Baltimore Sun

A view of Baltimore's skyline from the Broadway East neighborhood.



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Baltimore's spending board on Wednesday unanimously approved a new three-year contract for the gunshot detection technology known as ShotSpotter, which has been ditched by other cities across the

country.

The surveillance technology uses acoustic sensors to detect gunfire and then alerts police of the incidents. The company, SoundThinking Inc., argues it allows police to respond more quickly to gunfire, respond to additional scenes and collect evidence.

The new $2.13 million contract, which will run from December 2023 through December 2026, was approved on Wednesday largely without discussion. The board also noted the police department's emergency spending that took place between the last contract extension's end date in June 2022 and the new start date to keep the system running.

Council President Nick Mosby asked whether the agreement was a "sole-source" contract, meaning it was not open to other bids, because it is the only company to provide such technology. The city's chief procurement officer said yes.

Baltimore's unanimous approval contrasts with other cities nationwide, including Chicago, where the mayor has announced his plans to end the city's deal with the company. Durham, North Carolina, is also cutting ties with the program. Other cities that have opted against renewing contracts include Atlanta and Dayton, Ohio.

Critics question the technology's effectiveness and price tag. In 2021, Baltimore's proposed contract extension to June 2022 faced pushback from Councilman Ryan Dorsey and activist DeRay McKesson, who both asked whether it had led to better outcomes for the city. At the time, Mayor Brandon Scott called himself the "biggest skeptic." He ultimately voted in favor of the extension and again in favor Wednesday.

The company also has been accused of contributing to the over-policing of communities of color by concentrating its acoustic sensors in specific geographies, sending police to the communities believing gunshots were fired, whether that is true or not.

Baltimore, which has participated in a ShotSpotter program since 2018, has sensors concentrated in areas that largely mirror the so-called Black Butterfly of marginalized communities. The detectors blanket the East and West Baltimore neighborhoods close to downtown, according to leaked data published by the online website Wired.

The company, which chose the locations, doesn't share the locations of its sensors, calling that information proprietary.

Police spokeswoman Lindsey Eldridge said last month that ShotSpotter provides police "valuable data in detecting areas with high crime to assist with patrols, maximize crime deterrence and aid in ongoing investigations."

The department received 2,473 ShotSpotter alerts in 2023. Shooting victims were found in 34 incidents and the alerts resulted in 10 arrests for a handgun-related offense and, in total, 41 arrests. Of those alerts, at least 200 were duplicates. In total, the 2023 alerts were connected to 495 shootings, homicides or weapons being fired, police previously said.

During that time, the program was operating in Baltimore via emergency spending, without a new spending deal coming before the Board of Estimates. Board documents show there was an "emergency procurement" for ShotSpotter from July 2022 through December 2022 for $375,000, as well as an "emergency contract extension" from December 2022 through December 2023 at a cost of $750,000.

The board agenda says the Baltimore Police commissioner, then Michael Harrison, requested both items in December 2022. That emergency spending was explained to the board Wednesday. It does not vote on emergency procurements.

Daniel Webster, a distinguished research scholar with Johns Hopkins' Center for Gun Violence Solutions, told The Baltimore Sun last month he isn't impressed by the technology's results, saying he hasn't seen "evidence of enhanced public safety as a result of ShotSpotter."

"I haven't even seen evidence that it improves the ability of police to arrest shooters," Webster said. "It seems like by now you ought to actually have proof that it adds value, leads to fewer fatalities, fewer shootings and gets dangerous people off the streets, at least for a while."

Jeff Gilleran from the Office of the Public Defender's Forensic Division said last month in an emailed statement that ShotSpotter is an "expensive tool" with a "minimum return on investment to the prosecution of gun violence." Pointing to Chicago moving away from the program, Gilleran said that was because it was a "waste of time and money."

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