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Seattle Times Editorial

Editorial: Seattle police's blue wall — hiding videos from open-records law

A Supreme Court ruling on Seattle police in-car-video records lays bare the vast challenges for presumptive Seattle Police Chief Kathleen O'Toole.

IF Kathleen O'Toole is confirmed Monday to be the next Seattle police chief — and she should be — she'll have to add another document to her big stack of reading.

The state Supreme Court last week highlighted yet another technological and cultural challenge the Seattle Police Department faces as it grinds its way into becoming a 21st-century force.

In [a 5-4 ruling](#), the court ruled that Seattle police had wrongly denied requests made under the state's Public Records Act by KOMO 4 reporter Tracy Vedder for in-car-video recordings and log notes. The city cited both state privacy laws and technological hurdles in defending the denials.

But, in an era of technology-powered transparency, Seattle police too often hides behind a blue wall of opaqueness.

O'Toole's challenge to fix this is twofold. The technological challenges of Seattle police are real, vast and have been known for years. The Supreme Court ruling lays bare one example, describing an in-car video-recording system held in a silo from other databases, including the department's police reports including those about use of force.

That has been spotlighted repeatedly by the Seattle City Council and, as recently as Tuesday, by Merrick Bobb, the federal watchdog on Seattle police's reforms. Bobb describes Seattle police as "20 years behind."

"Compared to many other law enforcement agencies, the SPD is flying blind," [Bobb wrote](#) in a report to the federal court this week.

In a community of dizzying technological innovation, that assessment should be an embarrassing failure, remedied with the greatest speed.

The court ruling also spotlighted a cultural problem with transparency within Seattle police. In the case, the department's attorneys argued Seattle police should not release any in-car videos for three years after they were shot because the videos potentially could be requested during litigation, and therefore should be withheld until the statute of limitations expires.

The court fortunately saw through that as an obfuscation of the Public Records Act. Litigation may prevent disclosure of some videos, but the exceptions must not be the rule. Videos shot on the taxpayer's dime are public record. Officers' conduct is of keen interest to the public. Transparency, not opaqueness, should be a bright-line rule under O'Toole's leadership.

The court ruling raises interesting questions about privacy in this digital age. Seattle police officers' in-car videos inevitably will record private personal information — such as Social Security numbers given to an officer, or the bloodied face of a domestic-violence victim.

The department must figure out how to screen out the private. That's a challenge, and one made more difficult by Seattle police's technology deficit.

O'Toole, the presumptive new chief, must prioritize infrastructure and cultural reforms worthy of a city that is a 21st-century wizard's gallery of digital innovation.

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