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City Council tests new technology to make meetings run smoother



JERRY MCBRIDE/Durango Herald photos

Streamlined screen time

BY CHRISTIAN BURNEY
HERALD STAFF WRITER

Public meetings in Durango City Hall's Smith Council Chambers are not always the smoothest experience.

Phone and laptop chargers on the dais create irritating hums from interference. Poor lighting and acoustics make meetings difficult to follow for city officials and audience members alike. Councilors sometimes struggle to view television screens that display agenda details during presentations.

The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated public meetings, pushing the city to incorporate fully remote and then hybrid attendance models, according to Durango's Information Technology Department. Since then, the city has

been working to improve the functionality of Smith Council Chambers for residents and city officials alike.

City councilors are testing new technology on the dais that may inform how new council chambers, expected to be completed in October 2027, will be equipped for more efficient meetings and to improve the audience experience.

Touch screen controllers installed in 2023 were updated this year with a queue function to allow the mayor, who procedurally guides public meetings, to call upon councilors. The controllers were updated with the ability for councilors to cast votes simultaneously. The votes are read aloud by an automated voice for the audience and city clerk staff members.

A hearing assistant system is planned to be installed later this



TOP: Durango Mayor Gilda Yazzie and Evan Roth, systems engineer for the city of Durango, test the city's controller new screens - Councilor Dave Woodruff's display is pictured above - in Smith Council Chambers at City Hall. The new technology places more information at councilors' fingertips, making meeting procedures easier and more efficient.

year. The system will broadcast audio in the council chambers to dedicated receivers and on the building's Wi-Fi network for use with personal devices, according to the IT department.

Since 2023, dais upgrades, including microphones and the electronic screens, have cost less than \$70,000, Tom Sluis, city spokesman, said. An exact cost wasn't available due to the piecemeal nature of upgrades. Councilors are still adapting

to the new technology. At the Feb. 3 City Council meeting, city officials smirked at an artificial intelligence voice that read how each councilor voted on agenda items. Someone joked that the AI reader could have a better fitting voice. City Attorney Mark Morgan reminded councilors the vote tally needs to be read aloud and shouldn't be talked over.

See **SCREENS, 8A**

Maria's: Police warrant illegal

Bookstore sues city after requests for client sales history

BY JESSICA BOWMAN
HERALD STAFF WRITER

Maria's Bookshop filed a lawsuit against the city of Durango last week, alleging violations of the U.S. Constitution and the Colorado Constitution after a Durango Police Department detective tried to obtain book purchase records for several customers.

"I want every customer who shops at Maria's Bookshop to know that what they buy and what they read is their private information," owner Evan Schertz said.

In January, Maria's Bookshop staff declined a request from DPD detective Sydney Walters to provide her with the purchase history of several customers, according to a complaint filed Friday.

Walters later returned with a warrant seeking customer records, including purchase histories, for four individuals. The store again refused to comply.

Instead, the bookstore filed a lawsuit asking a court to block the enforcement of the warrant, arguing it violates the constitutional free-speech and privacy rights of both the business and its customers.

"It is not a crime to read a book," said Chris Beall, a First Amendment lawyer representing Maria's Bookshop. "The notion that the government is entitled to know what books you've ordered - what books you've walked out the store with - is a pretty substantial infringement on your freedoms, your privacy, your ability to have a sort of intellectual life of your own."

See **MARIA'S, 8A**

Dueling sides of Flock debate shared at State Senate

Bill would require approval within 72 hours to search data recorded on cameras

BY CHRISTIAN BURNEY
HERALD STAFF WRITER

Durango Police Chief Brice Current testified to the Colorado Senate Judiciary Committee on Monday in opposition to Senate Bill 26-070, a bill proposing regulations on government access to location information databases such as Flock Safety networks.

Current was accompanied virtually by DPD patrol officer Crystal English and resident Matthew Ricketts, a victim of a hit-and-run in Durango last year.

Resident Ben Peters, a vocal advocate for the city of Durango canceling its contract with Flock



JERRY MCBRIDE/Durango Herald file

Safety, spoke in favor of the legislation.

The four were part of a larger group of 70 witnesses who testified for and against the legislation formally called "Ban Government Access Historical

Location Information Database."

In short, the proposed legislation would require law enforcement to acquire warrants to search Flock and similar databases after 72 hours, and would require the data to be purged

Durango police and residents testified to the Colorado Senate Judiciary Committee on Monday for and against legislation that would require law enforcement to acquire warrants to search Flock Safety and similar databases after 72 hours.

after 30 days.

The committee hearing mirrored conversations about Flock technology in Durango. The theme of privacy versus public safety was present throughout.

People opposed to location information databases invoked Orwellian surveillance states and warned of government abuse of sensitive data that exposes people's daily private travel habits. Law enforcement and other proponents of such databases spoke to how cases were solved and justice was delivered thanks to collected location information.

Current spoke broadly to the

benefits to public safety and law enforcement provided by the use of technology such as Flock cameras. English and Ricketts talked about how Flock cameras enabled Durango Police Department to identify and arrest the man who hit Ricketts with his vehicle.

Peters highlighted Flock network data he obtained from DPD through a records request and outlined his concerns about how such data could end up in the wrong hands.

Current said the proposed legislation conflicts with "long-standing legal precedent and the practical realities of investigation."

He said courts have already ruled people do not have a reasonable expectation of privacy when their license plates are observed in public spaces.

See **CAMERAS, 8A**

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