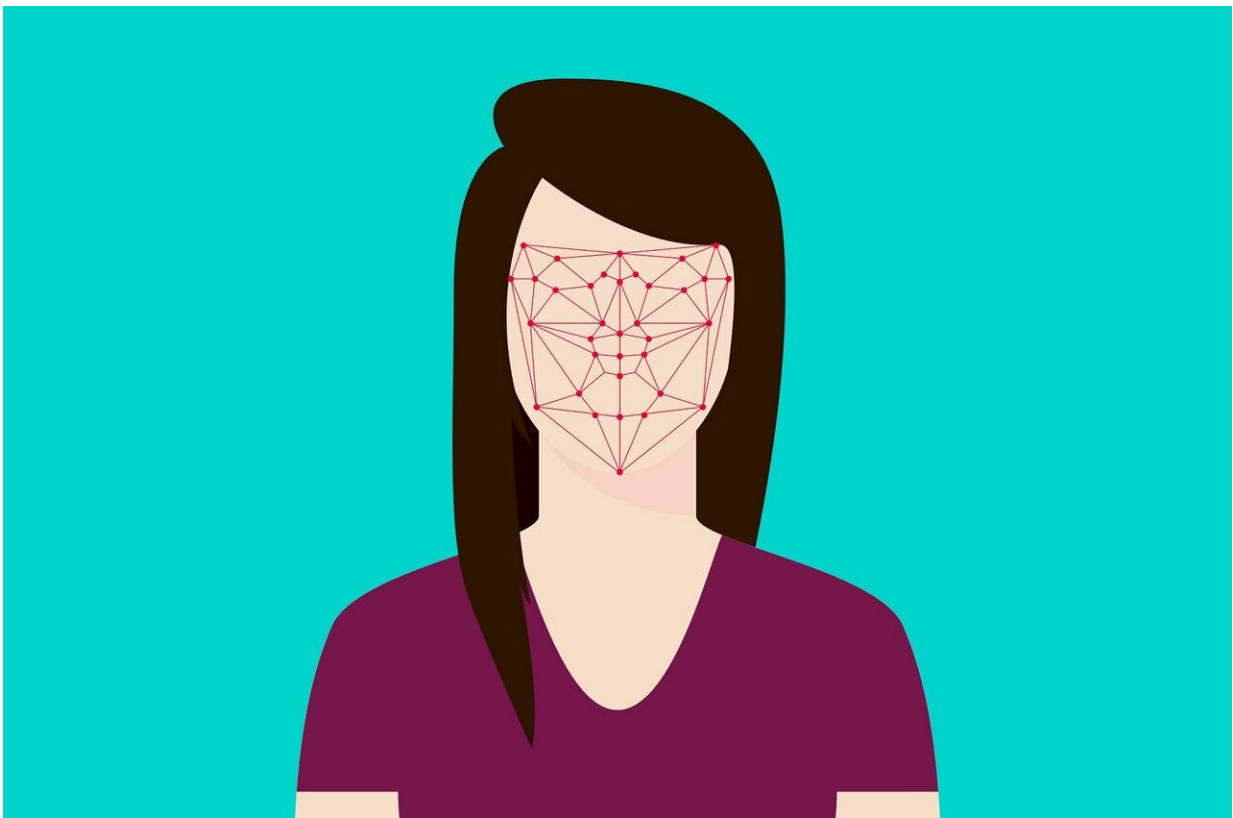


Sea-Tac is first airport to resist federal push for facial recognition and other biometric technologies

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At least for now, controversial facial-recognition technology won't be installed at boarding gates at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport,

making the airport the first in the country to resist the rollout of a federal biometric identification program.

After hours of impassioned public comment Tuesday, much of it from people calling [facial recognition](#) intrusive and dangerous, the Port of Seattle Commission unanimously approved a moratorium on some uses of the technology.

The five-member commission, which oversees Sea-Tac, suspended the introduction of some new biometric technologies—including facial recognition—until the commission adopts "tangible, enforceable" policies to govern their use.

The commission's vote halts Delta Air Lines' plans to roll out facial-recognition cameras at its Sea-Tac boarding gates by year-end.

The moratorium, though, applies only to areas the Port controls. Nor does the suspension apply to biometric technologies used solely by Port staff—for example, fingerprints used to access secure areas.

That means a Custom and Border Protection plan to install facial-recognition cameras at a new facility to process arriving international travelers, opening July 2020, will proceed as planned: The part of that building where the cameras will be located is controlled by the federal government.

And biometric technologies already in use at the airport—including CLEAR, a \$179/year service for travelers who want to jump to the top of the TSA line—will continue operating.

The vote means the Port has committed itself to grappling with an issue that's bedeviled federal and state legislators: How to balance civil-liberties concerns over biometrics with the efficiency and convenience

some say they deliver.

At the meeting, Port commissioners said they were open to the possibility that tension may be insoluble.

If the Port were to adopt a more permanent prohibition on biometrics, it would be following in the footsteps of cities like San Francisco and Somerville, Massachusetts, that have banned the use of facial recognition by city agencies.

Delta says replacing manual document checks with facial-recognition technology, which it already uses at seven other U.S. airports, speeds passenger flow. The airline says it eventually hopes to install the cameras at every point a traveler would normally have to pull out their passport and boarding pass at Sea-Tac: Check-in, bag check, TSA and boarding.

But the primary push for the spread of facial recognition to check-in terminals and boarding gates at 20 airports in the past year comes from the federal Customs and Border Protection agency, which has a congressional mandate to deploy a nationwide biometric program to identify international travelers.

The agency says facial-recognition algorithms are better than human agents at detecting some kinds of immigration fraud.

The agency has partnered with airlines and airports to screen travelers leaving the country. It's also installed its own cameras in 11 airport Customs terminals to identify arriving travelers.

No airport has sought to intervene in the program—until now.

Sea-Tac will be the first airport in the country to wrest some control over the rollout of facial recognition at airports back from the federal

government and private entities, said Eric Schinfeld, the Port's [federal government](#) liaison, at Tuesday's commission meeting.

The Port joins a long list of governments at the local, state and federal levels similarly wrestling with how to mitigate the dangers of biometrics.

Technologies like facial recognition enable intrusive surveillance, which is likely to most adversely impact minority communities, representatives of groups advocating for civil liberties, privacy and the interests of Asian and Muslim Americans said at the commission meeting.

Japanese internment, said Stan Shikuma, the president elect of the Japanese-American Citizens League, was enabled by "surveillance kept by the FBI, the Office of Naval Intelligence, as well as private citizens."

And facial-recognition algorithms tend to misidentify people of color, especially women, at a higher rate than white people.

Other speakers raised concerns about data security.

"Biometric data should not be taken lightly," said Cynthia Spiess, a security researcher. "You only have one face. What is the recourse to the victims? What is the liability to the Port when a data breach happens? Because this data will be breached."

Finding a way forward has stymied federal and local authorities, port staff acknowledged at the meeting.

At the national level, Congress has been unable to pass comprehensive regulation on biometrics.

In the state Legislature, bills to regulate facial recognition died this spring because lawmakers couldn't agree on an approach to the

technology.

In its resolution, the Port enumerated principles to guide the rollout of biometrics like facial recognition, including that the technology be implemented ethically, justifiably and voluntarily.

Protecting travelers' privacy and ensuring that the technology is equitable are other concerns of the Port.

Developing policy recommendations in line with those principles is the responsibility of a new working group composed of Port staff, airlines, cruise lines, technology companies and community representatives.

The working group has until the end of March to present the commission with recommendations of "tangible, enforceable" policies dictating how biometric technologies will be used.

"The recommendation could be that we don't think the technology is ready to use right now," said Commissioner Courtney Gregoire at the meeting.

The commission will vote on the policy recommendations by late June.

Until that time, a halt on the introduction of new biometric technologies is in effect.

Once the new [biometric](#) policies are passed, though, operators like CLEAR will need to prove its iris- and fingerprint-scanning terminals are compliant.

And airlines like Delta will need to show how they plan to comply before the Port permits them to install facial-recognition cameras.

In a statement, Delta said it believed its facial-recognition cameras "meet or exceed the guiding principles in the motion that the Port of Seattle adopted today."

The airline said its technology "adheres to high standards for data security and customer privacy—a responsibility Delta takes extremely seriously."

Much of the hard work to regulate facial recognition lies ahead, said Commissioner Ryan Calkins at the meeting.

Facial recognition, he said, "is neither an unmitigated good nor an unmitigated bad. The very attributes that make it so much of a benefit—convenience and customer satisfaction—make it very dangerous.

"This is only the starting point for us."

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