By Zella Hanson, Kelly Torres, and Alex Kumar

There were [795 shooting incidents](https://www.cbs17.com/news/local-news/durham-county-news/2021-saw-shooting-incidents-in-durham-drop-but-number-of-deadly-shootings-surge-preliminary-data-show/) in Durham last year, 45 of which were fatal.

“Folks are asking for help,” said Council member Leonardo Williams at Monday’s City Council meeting. “They’re saying, ‘just do something more, please.’”

So while the Durham City Council blocked ShotSpotter in [June 2019](https://9thstreetjournal.org/2019/11/13/a-tale-of-two-cities-lessons-for-durham-about-shotspotter/) and [September 2020](https://9thstreetjournal.org/2020/10/25/city-council-divided-on-best-response-to-gun-violence-surge/), earlier this month a majority of council members voted to move forward in the budget process for the coming fiscal year. They’re finally one step closer to setting aside $197,500 for a year-long pilot of ShotSpotter.

ShotSpotter is a gunfire detection system composed of microphones placed around a city. When the microphones sense gunfire, the police are notified and dispatched. By improving police response times and sending officers to scenes that might otherwise go unreported, ShotSpotter could save lives, proponents say.

Mayor Pro Tem Mark-Anthony Middleton, arguably the council’s most ardent supporter of ShotSpotter, said that [last year in Wilmington](https://www.wect.com/2021/10/19/wilmington-city-leaders-police-chief-present-life-saving-awards/), two police officers received awards for saving lives after responding to two separate ShotSpotter alerts. (Only one involved gunfire; the other person had sustained injuries breaking a window.)

“This is about when someone needs help,” Middleton said. If someone is hurt, even “in the middle of the night, someone will come and see about you.”

But there are questions as to ShotSpotter’s efficacy. The MacArthur Justice Center [found](https://www.macarthurjustice.org/shotspotter-generated-over-40000-dead-end-police-deployments-in-chicago-in-21-months-according-to-new-study/) that in Chicago, 88.7% of ShotSpotter alerts were “dead ends” -- incidents in which no gun was actually involved.

“What ShotSpotter *is* effective at is manufacturing consent for increased policing,” said Council member Jillian Johnson. “It increases the number of times that police are called.”

Naana Ewool of Durham Beyond Policing says most cities only place microphones in small areas… or in certain neighborhoods: “And those neighborhoods are often the ones that are majority Black and brown, with a higher number of folks being criminalized.”

“Police who arrive on the scene often escalate situations and introduce violence, so folks are more likely to get injured or killed,” Ewool said. “There’s [public health research](https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305414) that shows that regardless of the type of interaction, the more interaction folks have with police, the worse their health outcomes are.”

Danette Wilkins, a public health professional working for Johns Hopkins, implored the council to reject ShotSpotter. She cited a [report](https://igchicago.org/2021/08/24/oig-finds-that-shotspotter-alerts-rarely-lead-to-evidence-of-a-gun-related-crime-and-that-presence-of-the-technology-changes-police-behavior/) by the City of Chicago that says “the very presence of this technology is changing the way Chicago Police Department members interact with members of Chicago’s communities.”

Opponents think the $197,500 would be better spent elsewhere.

In general, “we need gun control, we need housing guarantees, we need a living wage,” Johnson said. “That’s how you end gun violence.”

Johnson said the city can “invest as much as we can into prevention and intervention techniques,” like the violence intervention program [Bull City United](https://www.dcopublichealth.org/services/health-education/bull-city-united/bull-city-united) and the [We Are The Ones Fund.](http://www.cypressfund.org/blog/announcing-the-2021-we-are-the-ones-grantees)

Middleton says these reforms and ShotSpotter are not mutually exclusive: “We had an election here recently where those visions were put out, and I think the people reject the zero-sum game. It’s not either/or.”

He resisted comparisons to Chicago and Charlotte, which [canceled its contract](https://spectrumlocalnews.com/nc/charlotte/news/2016/02/12/cmpd-cancels-contract-for-shotspotter-gunshot-detection-system) with ShotSpotter in 2016. “I have to govern based on data from Durham,” he said. “But we don’t have that, and so I really want this to be a pilot in the truest sense. I want the Durham-specific data points.”

In an interview, Ralph A. Clark, president and CEO of ShotSpotter, said the technology bridges “a fairly significant public safety gap.” He points out that “80 to 90 percent of gun fired events go unreported. So that means guns are fired, there’s no call to 911, which means there is no police response.”

In Oakland, California, Clark says, ShotSpotter technology has saved more than 100 gunshot wound victims. The company also says its sensors detection rate is 97%.

Clark added: “It’s very confusing to me to see people have a negative reaction to the idea that police are able to respond to incidents of gunfire.”

Williams agreed. “Give us a chance to try this,” he said. “If it works, it works. If it doesn’t, we’re going to try something else.”

Council member Javiera Caballero, who would prefer that the city spend funds on other violence-reduction efforts, says officials will have six months to collect the data about the gunfire detection technology. After that, the city has to pay for ShotSpotter.

She doesn’t think Durhamites have had enough of a chance to hear about ShotSpotter, but she expects it to be funded when the council votes on the budget.

Opponents want the city to keep searching for solutions.

“Communities are dealing with so much grief and so much fear because of gun violence,” Ewool said. “Just offering them something—anything—isn’t fair. People deserve things that are going to provide real solutions and real healing.”

Leonardo Williams – quoted d