The Homeland Security Department paid contractors millions of dollars to develop and study surveillance systems that could covertly track pedestrians and check under people's clothing with airport-style body scanners as they enter train stations, bus depots or major events, newly released documents show.

Two contracts the department signed in 2005 and 2006 were part of its effort to acquire technology to find suicide bombers in a crowd of moving people, according to documents given to the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC), a privacy-rights group that is suing Homeland Security.

The department dropped the projects in a "very early" phase after testing showed flaws, Homeland Security spokesman Bobby Whithorne says.EPIC lawyer Ginger McCall says the project is disturbing nonetheless because it shows the department "obviously believed that this level of surveillance is acceptable when in fact it is not at all acceptable."

A $1.9 million contract with Rapiscan Systems, which makes airport body scanners, asked the company to develop similar machines for "covert inspection of moving subjects" and to find explosives on suicide bombers "through clothing, backpacks and other packages." The contract was signed in 2005.

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