

Probe on police surveillance to begin

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ANNAPOLIS (AP) — The Senate Constitutional and Public Law Committee begins its investigation of police surveillance activities Tuesday night behind closed doors.

No one around the General Assembly seems to know how long the apparently unprecedented probe will continue, how many witnesses will testify and just when—if ever—the doors will be opened to the public.

Maryland law specifically provides that a legislative committee acting in an investigative capacity is free to bar the media and the public from its sessions.

Compared to the executive and judicial branches of state government,

the General Assembly has been a relative open book.

Outside of a now-abandoned practice of barring outsiders from fiscal committee sessions to finalize the state budget, the doors in the legislature have been open.

The pending probe of police surveillance, however, breaks new ground for a legislative committee. No one can recall when a committee ever initiated an investigation, which is a far different process than hearing routine testimony on specific bills.

Senate President Steny Hoyer and Sen. Edward T. Conroy, D-Prince Georges, the committee chairman, say the investigation will begin behind closed doors in order to protect the rights of the

innocent.

"We have to take the position that we would protect the rights of people who do not wish their names to be involved or people who fall into the category of those who would bring us sensational information," said Conroy, who voted against having closed-door sessions.

The first person expected to testify Tuesday night is Donald D. Pomerleau, the commissioner of the Baltimore Police Department and one of the reasons why the investigation is taking place at all.

Pomerleau is the creator and ultimate superior of the Inspectional Services Division (ISD), an undercover and surveillance unit of the city force.

The committee decided to undertake the investigation following the appearance of news stories accusing the unit of violating constitutional rights of persons not directly tied to criminal wrongdoing.

Among the alleged targets of the spy unit were clergy, black politicians, news media personnel and members of civil rights and anti-war groups.