

Cameras elsewhere said to cut crime

BY JILL WHALEN (STAFF WRITER)

Published: December 13, 2009

While no formal studies have been done, it appears that a video surveillance system is responsible for a decrease in criminal activities in Lancaster.

Hazleton officials believe such a system could do the same for the city, and are hopeful that an application for \$2 million in state funds for a surveillance project will be approved. Members of the newly formed A Safer Hazleton nonprofit organization are handling the grant application.

"Such a system in key areas of the city would certainly serve as a deterrent to criminals due to the mere presence of the cameras. Additionally, not only could police be dispatched to an area where criminal activity is being observed in real-time, but video footage would help in solving crimes and getting convictions after they have been committed," said Hazleton Police Chief Robert Ferdinand.

Lancaster's system has been operational for about six years, and despite a few recent rumblings from some residents who claim the cameras are an invasion of privacy, the system has been widely accepted by residents, according to an official there.

Currently, the city of Wilkes-Barre is setting up a system that will eventually include almost 240 cameras. Hazleton and other municipal representatives were recently invited to the system's command center to see how it works.

Hazleton City Councilman Jack Mundie was on hand for the demonstration. He said monitors with feeds from cameras perched in Wilkes-Barre have been set up. If Hazleton's grant comes through, Hazleton's monitors will be at the center, too.

A private contracting firm hired by Hawkeye Security Solutions, the nonprofit organization handling the network's implementation, will watch the monitors. Mundie said the contractors will report activity they see to city police officers and Luzerne County 911 dispatchers. At that point, he said, emergency personnel would be deployed.

"They gave an example of seeing kids walking with ... bats and not going to a ball field," Mundie said. "If they see something like that, something that might look like it will turn into a fight, they can call it to the attention of police."

Mundie said a surveillance system for the city would be a crime deterrent.

"It makes areas safer when there are cameras and people see them," he said. "They serve as an extra set of eyes."

Whether folks will protest the additional security, he said, remains to be seen.

"I think today most people don't mind it as much if it makes a neighborhood safer and if it protects your property or your life," he said. "I think they will look at it as a trade-off."

A Safer Hazleton is hoping to place the cameras in city business districts and playgrounds.

"I think it would help those neighborhoods," Mundie said. "I think most residents would accept them. There are always trade-offs with your personal freedoms. But they help, they solve crimes and keep neighborhoods safe."

Such is the case in Lancaster, said Jessica Falk, secretary of the Lancaster Community Safety Coalition, a nonprofit agency that oversees the security network there. Falk said it started small with just a few cameras and has grown to include 162.

Although no official studies have been done to determine whether the cameras are working, Falk said they have been credited with helping to avert and solve crimes.

Cameras have picked up car thefts, robberies and assaults, and have even helped Lancaster police solve a murder, she said.

"They have been very useful," Falk noted.

Lancaster Mayor J. Richard Gray, in a letter regarding the surveillance system, wrote, "While research has been inconclusive as to the impact of cameras on preventing crime, our own experience leaves no doubt that, but for the presence of video cameras, many perpetrators of both property crimes and violent crimes would not be apprehended and prosecuted."

For the most part, Lancaster residents are pleased with the cameras.

"Almost everything we hear is positive," Falk said.

A few residents, however, came forward this summer to protest the cameras, saying they are an invasion of privacy.

Because Lancaster has cameras in residential sections of the city, they are equipped with privacy-masking software that "blocks out" homes' windows.

The same would be done in Hazleton, Ferdinand said.

"A camera system is intended to monitor public areas. With current advances in technology, citizens would not have to worry about invasions of privacy using the system," he said. "For example, where a camera mounted on a utility pole may have a part of its view through a window of a private residence, that portion would be digitally blocked out permanently so there is no possibility to invade one's privacy. Those monitoring the system would be incapable of overriding those digitally blocked-out areas."

Wilkes-Barre City Administrator J.J. Murphy said he's heard no opposition from the public about the system.

The city is in the early stages of the project, with about nine cameras online as of Thursday, he said.

"In a short time frame, probably in the next week, we should have another 20 cameras brought online at the least," he said. Another 50 to 80 will be added by the end of the year. Eventually, he said, 238 cameras will be placed across the city, from its parks and residential areas to places that typically see higher rates of criminal activities. Cameras at schools, city parking garages and the downtown business district will also be part of the system.

Once the project is completed, he said, Wilkes-Barre will have the highest number of cameras per capita in the nation - taking the title from Lancaster.

As for Hazleton, Ferdinand said he and Mayor Lou Barletta began looking into surveillance systems about four years ago but were unable to find funding. This time, the city will seek state gaming revenues through the state's Department of Community and Economic Development - the type of funds awarded to Wilkes-Barre.

Lena Kotansky, secretary of A Safer Hazleton, said the city might have a better chance of receiving the grant because it would be working with Wilkes-Barre.

Ferdinand pointed to an additional benefit through the regional approach.

"Consolidating resources with Wilkes-Barre makes economic sense when we consider that Hazleton will not have to duplicate many of the costs for equipment, plus the ongoing real expenses for full-time manning of such a system," he said. "The fact that the monitors are in Wilkes-Barre has no real importance since it will be the virtual equivalent of 'being in the next room.' When activity is observed on camera, all that is required is a phone call or radio transmission to dispatch a Hazleton officer - the same actions that would be taken if the monitoring room were in just another room at City Hall or elsewhere in the city."

Vilmarie Budde, chapter leader of the Hazleton Guardian Angels, is keeping her fingers crossed that the city receives the grant.

"It will definitely serve as a deterrent to crime," said Budde, who patrols the city's streets on a regular basis with other members of the Guardian Angels. "I'd love to see the cameras out there. It would help so much. It would help the police. It would help us as a crime watch. It would help the community."

Those looking to break the law might think twice if they know a camera is watching, and youths tempted to skip school might even decide otherwise because a system is in place, she said.

Video cameras can provide evidence, and area business owners can feel safe knowing their stores are being observed, Budde said.

In 2006, the borough of Shenandoah discussed adding a video surveillance system. Borough Manager Joe Palubinsky said although the borough sought grants, officials eventually dropped the project.

jwhalen@standardspeaker.com