



Davenport police might tap volunteer to monitor surveillance cameras

Tory Brecht | Posted: Sunday, April 25, 2010 2:00 am | [\(30\) Comments](#)

Davenport's eyes in the sky — 50 or so surveillance video cameras — may soon be monitored by citizens volunteering to be a high-tech Neighborhood Watch with a citywide gaze.

The idea came from an alderman impressed by the swift arrest of skybridge vandals whose images were caught by cameras trained on the riverfront landmark.

Police generally use video images after a crime is committed for investigative purposes. They do not sit in front of monitors waiting for crime or suspicious activity to occur. Alderman Bill Boom wondered what if volunteers — such as the Guardian Angels or Volunteers in Police Service or an average citizen — could log on and watch from home?

Boom soon learned that the sophistication of Davenport's system doesn't yet allow for at-home monitoring. But after meeting with police and the city's information technology staff, a plan emerged for a pilot program in which volunteers go to the police station's command headquarters to watch images from the skybridge cameras. "Long term, we'd like to do it from remote locations, involve more people and monitor more locations," Boom said. "We would get more volunteers if you could do it from your own house. I think there are people out there who are more than happy to do that as a public service."

Davenport Police Chief Frank Donchez said he supports the plan, although he acknowledges there will be critics who think it infringes on their rights.

"What I don't understand is when people talk about their right to privacy and they are in a public place," he said. "You don't have a right to privacy in public. The bottom line is, if we could afford to have 5,000 police officers, we'd have one on every corner. So what is the difference?"

That was cold comfort to critics, such as the American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa.

"Welcome to 1984," said Randall Wilson, the Iowa ACLU's legal director. "It's not a bad thing for people to be wary of what's going on around them and to interact positively with police. The precedent has been set with Neighborhood Watch. What's disturbing is when it becomes Orwellian."

Wilson conceded it's unlikely there could be a legal challenge to a volunteer video surveillance program — constitutional law cases clearly demonstrate there can be no expectation of privacy in public — but the long-term implications are troubling, he said.

“The consequences of this are that law enforcement and the government have very powerful, heavy-handed tools to use for suppression of the civilian population should they choose to do that,” he said. “In the future, combined with facial recognition software and a national identification database, people are going to be surprised at how little freedom of movement they have without being tracked.”

James “Nitro” Steel, chapter leader of the Davenport Guardian Angels, thinks it’s reasonable for video technology to be used to further public safety. He sees little difference between someone watching a television monitor and calling in crime than what the volunteer Guardian Angels do on a nightly basis on patrol.

“My philosophy is if it’s in public, then anybody and everybody should be able to see what’s going on,” he said. “Anyone who is concerned about privacy with the cameras is probably doing something wrong.”

Lt. Dale Sievert, the department’s director of internal affairs, said citizen volunteers would be given training. Officers will want to make sure their helpers are providing useful information that can be used on the street. Police have had a great experience with the Volunteers in Police Service, or VIPS, helpers, who perform background checks, investigate gas drive-offs and pitch in on administrative duties.

“They are such a help, it’s almost indescribable,” he said. “The more people we can get active out there and report things, the quicker we can respond and the better off we are.”

Anytime the public and police cooperate, it’s a positive thing, Donchez said. He does not worry about over-reliance on technology.

“I think technology is a great tool, but when it comes to policing, it will never replace officers on the street,” he said.