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Always watching: State College beefing up surveillance with 71 new cameras in public areas downtown

By Raychel Shipley

For the CDT April 19, 2014

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Electrician Scott Koenig installs a security camera on a building at the Allen St. and Calder Way intersection. State College is in the process of installing 71 cameras in the borough.

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STATE COLLEGE — Penn State students Chelsea Billotte, Amy Haun and Fye Poon stood at the corner of East Calder Way and McAllister Alley, awaiting their drinks at the storefront of Tea Time.

What the young women did not realize was that about 15 feet away, a camera looked down on the intersection, documenting their quick refreshment stop.

The three were surprised when the camera was brought to their attention, yet they seemed to appreciate its presence.

“I like it actually,” Haun said. “I have thought when I’m back here, ‘What if something happens? Who would know?’ And now that I see that, I feel a little better.”

The camera is one of three downtown units operated by State College since 2003. Now the borough is expanding its public and internal surveillance systems, installing 71 new cameras in the municipal building, in parking garages and in selected downtown areas.

The Borough Council approved a \$450,000 contract to expand the downtown video surveillance system in October. With the additions, the system will go from wired to wireless. The contract is with CelPlan Technologies Inc., of Reston, Va.

Were the students being watched as they purchased their tea? According to Borough Manager Tom Fountaine, no.

"There was a period where we ran a pilot project to do live monitoring, and what we found is that we did not see a substantial benefit," Fontaine said. "I can't remember the last time we did a live-monitor event."

The cameras are used to help solve crimes, rather than prevent them.

"Generally, the research does not show that cameras are a deterrent to crime," Fontaine said. "It's a crime-solving tool as much as anything."

The borough's approach is in contrast to that of its neighbor, Penn State, which has more than 2,000 cameras on its main campus. There, the intent behind using cameras is crime prevention, according to Paul Ruskin, business operations coordinator of the Office of Physical Plant.

Fontaine said the borough's cameras have signs nearby so the public is aware that they are being watched. The green signs, located across the street from the cameras, read: "This public area may be monitored and/or recorded by video cameras."

That approach, too, contrasts with that of Penn State, which does not have signs near its cameras. "The general rule is that if you can't see a camera, it's not there," Ruskin said.

Fontaine says the cameras are aimed at what is in public view and are designed not to peer into private spaces.

Installation of the 71 new cameras is progressing.

"It's kind of been a moving time frame," said Hillary Pasch, the borough's information technology project manager. Pasch said she has been working with flexible, changing deadlines but hopes to have the project done by the summer.

Key points downtown

Pasch said cameras have been installed in the municipal building and the parking garages — with about 34 allocated, half to the building and the rest to the parking areas.

"The downtown cameras are a whole other story because of the approval process we have to go through," Pasch said.

Before any installation, the borough must get approval for all public surveillance camera locations from the companies that own the buildings or utility poles where the cameras might be installed. Lion Country Electric is doing the installation.

"The company has been able to install very quickly, so once those are approved I don't foresee it taking too long to get everything installed, up and running," Pasch said.

According to Pasch, there will be 14 new camera locations downtown, with three-fourths of those locations already approved.

She said she is looking at placing cameras on Beaver and College avenues in the vicinity of Atherton, Allen, Pugh, McAllister, Locust, Hiester, Garner and Sowers streets, and along Calder Way.

The locations were determined by traffic volumes.

The borough decided not to install rotating cameras. "Any time we had to pan, tilt, zoom it in any direction, it was always pointing the wrong direction when the crime was happening," Pasch said.

She said that at each camera mount, multiple units will provide a 360-degree view.

Pasch said staff involved in the project and the vendor did several walk-throughs from different vantage points to determine the best camera locations.

Protecting assets, neighborhoods

Fontaine said cameras in the municipal building and parking garages serve a different purpose than those placed around the downtown. In the garages, cameras monitor revenue control systems, gates and public lobbies. In the municipal building, cameras are used for risk management.

“We had a guy come in one night who appeared to be trying to get into one of the offices,” Fontaine said. “He ended up smashing one of the TV monitors in the lobby. We were able to capture that on video. Unfortunately, we didn’t get a clear look at his face.

“These new systems are better-quality video. With the new system, I think we would have been able to capture an image and, hopefully, that would have helped with solving that crime.”

Camera footage can be viewed for up to 30 days, Pasch said.

There is a provision in the project to do a test with public surveillance cameras in the Highlands neighborhood, where Penn State fraternities are located, Fontaine said.

“I don’t know whether that is ever going to happen or not,” he said. “There is some interest on the part of the neighborhood organization in that area.

“We sort of included it as a ‘This is another phase of the project in the contract,’ but we don’t have the funding for it right now.”

Longtime Highlands residents Laird and Svitlana Jones said they think cameras in the neighborhood could help solve problems — such as vandalism, robbery and assault — that sometimes coincide with the parties there.

Trees and other obstructions call into question whether public surveillance cameras would be effective in that neighborhood, Fontaine said.

“We’re reluctant to jump into a project unless we’re sure of the cost benefits.”

Raychel Shipley is a Penn State journalism student.

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