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12/19/2008

Surveillance cameras watching for crime in downtown Reading

By Steven Henshaw
Reading Eagle

Seated in front of a computer monitor in a cozy room in City Hall, Michael A. Garipoli moves a joystick to zoom in a camera's lens on vehicles driving on Washington Street past the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts.

It's possible to read license plates and identify facial features of approaching motorists a few blocks away.

Garipoli pans the camera, which is mounted on a pole at Second and Washington streets, to follow traffic as it winds past the Reading Movies 11/IMAX theater onto the Penn Street Bridge.

A blown-up version of the image is projected on one of two large wall-mounted monitors. On the monitors, police department employees can simultaneously display live images fed by other cameras placed in and near Reading's downtown. Video from 16 cameras can be displayed on one screen.

Since early December, 19 of the 25 cameras ordered by the department have been installed at strategic locations in the first phase of a \$1.4 million crime-prevention project, said Garipoli, a retired city policeman now working as the department's technology coordinator.

Garipoli said poles must be erected before the six remaining cameras can be mounted, which he expects will occur within a few weeks.

The cameras have been a long time coming for police Chief William M. Heim, who initially proposed the idea in the late 1990s when he served his first stint as chief.

When Heim returned as Reading chief in 2006, he and Mayor Tom McMahon made cameras one of their top priorities for cutting crime.

"We're really optimistic it's going to improve safety in the city, making it more comfortable for people to use the city and more uncomfortable for offenders knowing their actions are going to be caught on camera," the chief said of the video system.

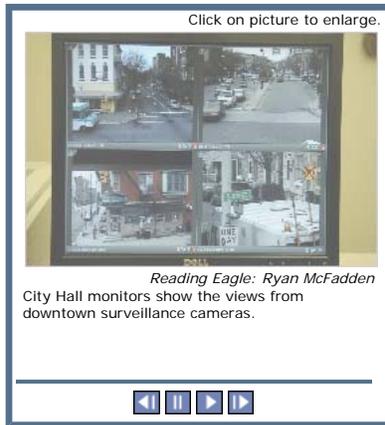
Two offenders found that out earlier this month when a detective saw a drug transaction taking place in a car that was parked near one of the cameras, which had been operational for less than a day, Garipoli said.

The detective was in the control room, getting training on the system, when he noticed something suspicious.

He zoomed in on the car and could clearly see the passenger in the car hand crack cocaine to the driver, who handed the driver cash, Garipoli said.

The detective sent officers to the location and arrested both men on drug charges. Police wouldn't disclose the location.

The city received state and federal funds for the system and also committed nearly \$400,000 from its capital improvements fund.



Click on picture to enlarge.
Reading Eagle: Ryan McFadden
City Hall monitors show the views from downtown surveillance cameras.

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Additional funding would be needed for the second phase, which could bring an additional 50 cameras, Heim said. He did not know when phase two might start.

Heim said the department is taking small steps in rolling out the new technology, with personnel gradually gaining a comfort level.

"We want to respect privacy," he said, noting the cameras only will see what a person would be able to see from the same vantage point. "This is not a toy; the purpose is for preventing crime and aiding in investigations."

Heim said the city hasn't received any citizen complaints about the cameras intruding on privacy.

He said the cameras are not intended as an end-all to the city's crime problems, but rather one piece of an comprehensive crime-prevention strategy.

The locations of the cameras aren't necessarily a secret, but police don't want to publicly reveal the entire network. Some cameras may be moved depending on crime trends, police have said.

"Where there's no camera today, there could be a camera tomorrow," Heim said.

•Contact reporter Steven Henshaw at 610-371-5028 or shenshaw@readingeagle.com.

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