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McAllen closer to installing surveillance cameras: More than 100 cameras could be operational by next month

By Nick Pipitone The Monitor, Mc Allen, Texas

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Dec. 17--MCALLEN -- City officials are one step closer to installing about 100 police video surveillance cameras in three large swaths of the city, McAllen Police Chief Victor Rodriguez announced Wednesday.

By the end of January, city officials hope to have installed 101 of the cameras, which will feed into servers at the police station via a wireless network.

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Rodriguez said the cameras -- attached to the tops of streetlights and traffic lights -- will help police gather evidence and collect reliable leads.

"The object of this over the long term is to cover the entire city with a wireless network and video surveillance," Rodriguez said.

The city's Information Technology Department finished setting up the wireless network Nov. 20 in the downtown area from Jackson Avenue to Business 83, along the Bicentennial Boulevard hike-and-bike trail and in Municipal Park.

The network could be available for use by other city departments and the general public once the city finishes installing the cameras, said Belinda Mercado, the McAllen's IT director.

The cameras will be stationary but will record continuously, Rodriguez said. Recordings will be archived on police computer servers.

Using the new system, the Police Department will be able cover ground that would take "an indeterminable amount of money" to cover if it were to just add more officers.

"Let's suppose that in the future we're looking for a particular vehicle that left a crime scene," Rodriguez said. "If I get that (vehicle and license plate on camera), that's an absolute lead."

Rodriguez said the department is sensitive to privacy concerns and that the video surveillance would not be an invasion of privacy. Archived recordings will be erased after 30 days if they are not needed as evidence.

Police also do not intend to monitor live feeds, the chief said. And the cameras will be fixed on public locations, not private property.

Groups like the American Civil Liberties Union oppose the widespread use of video surveillance, arguing the systems have a potential for abuse and are not effective at deterring crime.

The McAllen City Commission approved the purchase of a video surveillance system by a majority vote at its Aug. 24 meeting for an amount not to exceed just less than $612,000. In May, the commission approved the installation of the Wi-Fi network, which cost about $400,000, Rodriguez said.

Covering the entire city with a wireless and surveillance network could cost about $10 million, the chief said.

The city has applied for $10 million in federal stimulus money to help achieve that goal, said Mercado, the information technology director. She expects a response to the request sometime in February.

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Nick Pipitone covers McAllen, PSJA, the Mid-Valley and general assignments for The Monitor. He can be reached at (956) 683-4446.

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