



LAPD's 16 San Fernando Valley surveillance cameras go live

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Feeds from a new mobile, wireless security camera system are shown Thursday, Jan. 17, 2013 at LAPD's West Valley Community Police Station. The cameras can use facial recognition technology from 600 feet. (Hans Gutknecht/Staff Photographer)



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As easily as if he were opening bookmarked pages on a browser, Steve Getz clicked around to the seven presets on his computer monitor.

Two miles away, a camera moved at his command.

Sitting at the corner of Reseda Boulevard and Clark Street, the Los Angeles Police Department video camera can scan 360 degrees: the parking lot of a Gelson's, north toward Burbank Boulevard, south toward Ventura Boulevard.

It's one of 16 new cameras in the southwestern San Fernando Valley that went online a few weeks ago, most atop traffic signals or light poles.

On Thursday afternoon, police let reporters get a glimpse of the cameras in action at the LAPD's West Valley station in Reseda.

Sitting in a tiny windowless control room, Getz, a reserve officer, showed how he can also move the cameras with a joystick. Overhead, six flat-screen televisions bolted to the wall showed live feeds from the cameras, mirroring six computer monitors manned by Getz and an LAPD volunteer.

These aren't the first LAPD cameras, but they're the most high tech. They can show an entire store and parking lot, then zoom in seconds so a person walking out of the store fills the screen. With 35x zoom, they can recognize faces from 600 feet.

Older cameras, including those in the Mission Division in

the eastern Valley, work via microwave signals, which require direct lines of sight from one camera to the next and back to the police station. And the setup is bulky, so moving them is a bit like moving a house: possible, but expensive and awkward.

The new cameras are smaller and easy to move. Because they run on Verizon's 4G network, they work anywhere there's cellphone service. As crime moves, the cameras move.

They're mostly watched by volunteers. Even when no one's watching, they make digital recordings 24 hours a day. So officers and detectives can go back to use the footage to solve crimes, and prosecutors can use it to convict suspects.

"The good part about this, too, is the bad guy never knows when someone's watching them," Getz said. "They don't know when someone's here and someone's not here."

The 16 cameras are split evenly between the West Valley and Topanga divisions, which cover 66 square miles and about 450,000 people.

Capt. John Egan, commander of the West Valley Division, said the cameras haven't led to any arrests yet.

Police hope they'll help solve lots of crimes, even homicides. But Capt. Tom Brascia, the Topanga Division commander, said the cameras might be even more helpful in property crimes, which are tough to solve since they're often committed in the dark with no one else around.

Better yet, they might serve as a deterrent to committing crime in the first place.

Diane Taylor, who owns a pawn shop in Reseda and is a member of the West Valley police boosters, said police cameras make her feel safer. She also has 30 cameras in and around her business, she said.

Companies with their own Web-based surveillance cameras can let the police watch their feeds live. They just need to hand over an IP address and password. Royal Barber, a senior lead officer in West Valley, said about 10 businesses in the division have done that already, and police encourage more to do so.



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The 16-camera system cost just less than \$680,000, money that came from ad sales on public benches and other street furniture. More than 90 percent of that money went to Reston, Va.-based CelPlan Technologies. The rest was for high-speed Internet lines and other support.

The money came from a discretionary fund controlled by City Councilman Dennis Zine, who represents the western Valley. Zine said the cameras were held up for several years because he wanted them to be mobile and "state of the art."

Police wouldn't say exactly where all the cameras are since that would help criminals. Commanders have said they hope that uncertainty, plus other cameras such as those owned by the city Department of Transportation, will confuse the criminally inclined and deter crime.

In other cities, police have supplemented real cameras with decoys, empty shells that do nothing but make it impossible for criminals to tell where the real ones are.

Asked whether there are decoy cameras in West Valley, Barber smiled and said, "We're probably not going to mention that. We have eight actives right now."