



Cameras may join city's crimefighting arsenal

By Glenn Smith
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Police Chief Greg Mullen

The eyes of Charleston police may soon be upon you as you stroll through the streets of the Holy City.

Police Chief Greg Mullen said Tuesday he wants to install video surveillance cameras in high-crime areas to monitor public spaces for signs of trouble. Cameras can help police spot crimes in the making and better track crooks as they try to make their getaway, he said.

Mullen wants to start off with about 10 cameras, and is seeking federal grant money to pay for the equipment.

"I think there are a lot of opportunities for us to use this technology for crime-fighting initiatives," he said. "This technology is a way to make the city safer."

Video surveillance has become more commonplace across the country, with cities such as Chicago making wide use of the technology. But all-seeing cameras still spark debates in many communities, pitting public safety against civil liberty concerns.

Mullen said he is sensitive to those concerns and wants to make sure the community is comfortable with the plan before the department proceeds. Strict policies would govern use of

the cameras, and they wouldn't be used to spy on private homes or individuals. They would simply record what occurs on streets and other public spaces, he said.

"Everything would be in public venues," he said. "The only thing the camera sees is what people normally would see when they walk down the sidewalk."

City Councilman Wendell Gilliard praised the proposal. He has long advocated the use of surveillance cameras to curtail drug dealing and other crime. Gilliard pushed for signs that were posted around the city warning passers-by that they could be subject to video surveillance. The taping, for the most part, was left to residents.

"Cameras have proven to be a big crime preventative measure, and I think we ought to use them," he said. "It's been a long time coming here."

Throughout his career, Mullen has looked to emerging technologies to help combat crime. He shepherded a similar video surveillance program, to mixed reviews, while working as a police commander in Virginia Beach. Critics accused police of employing invasive Big Brother tactics.

But many residents considered the cameras an innocuous tool that helped make the beach front safer.

A \$200,000 pilot program paired the resort city's cameras with facial recognition software designed to help police identify and catch criminals in tourist areas. Technical problems marred the facial recognition program, which didn't yield a single arrest in the three years it was in place.

But Mullen said the cameras themselves proved to be invaluable tools, helping police pinpoint crime and make more efficient use of manpower and resources.

Arthur Lawrence, president of the Charleston's West Side Neighborhood Association, also supports video surveillance. His neighborhood has struggled for years with crime and violence. In March, a 37-year-old woman was shot to death at Bogard and President streets. Her body was found just a few blocks from Nunan Street, where a 32-year-old man had died in a shooting one week earlier.

"If cameras were out here, police could see exactly what's going on. I think the neighborhood would welcome it," Lawrence said. "The only people who should have a concern are the people who are doing something wrong."

City Councilman Jimmy Gallant, chairman of council's public safety committee, said the cameras could be a benefit to the city as long there are assurances that they won't be used to infringe on people's rights or target particular groups.

"I would want to see them used across the board," he said. "I don't just want to see them dumped in high-crime areas of the African-American community."

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