

Public weighs in on police camera initiative

By Kelli Hadley, Daily News staff writer | Posted: Thursday, February 16, 2012 12:00 am

The Pullman Police Department held the second of three meetings Wednesday to determine the public's thoughts on installing cameras in the College Hill and Adams Mall areas.

A \$300,000 Smart Policing Initiative grant from the federal Department of Justice was received last year for the project, among 30 others currently under way around the country.

During the public meeting, the question was asked more than once: Where will the video feed from cameras go, and who will have access to it?

Police Chief Gary Jenkins said they will receive information from hardware bidders some time next week, and will be able to answer questions about the technology more specifically after a company is selected. Until then, Jenkins said they know information will be streamed to a central server. There will be different access levels of who will be able to view the camera footage at the police department. Also, footage likely will be streamed to police cars, he said. It's unlikely that the cameras will ever be turned off, but there may times when they aren't recording. Jenkins said they may use motion sensors to capture activity on the cameras.

"We thought we could get eight cameras with the funds we'll have for hardware, but we won't know until bids come in," Jenkins said. "We told bidders we wanted to be able to identify people in low light conditions, also. But it's a matter of what the vendors are going to come back with."

Jenkins said they'll likely have the cameras installed this summer when trees are leafed out to make sure wireless signal transmissions are not blocked. Since it is a two-year grant, the cameras will be in place for a full academic year, an adequate amount of time to gather data for analysis.

"We're hoping to be able to have a positive impact on serious assaults that occur, and have a result of a safer area for residents and students in the Adams Mall area," Jenkins said. "We want the public to feel comfortable with these cameras, because the ultimate goal is public safety."

Though it's been determined that the cameras primarily will go on College Hill and in the Adams Mall area, Hayes said they'll be conducting interviews with College Hill stakeholders soon to determine exactly where they believe cameras should be installed. Right now they are planning on monitoring areas around Colorado Street, A Street, B Street and California Street, which are where most serious assaults seem to occur.

The next meeting for public input will be at noon, March 21 in the Compton Union Building Lair, hosted by Associated Students of Washington State University.

"A lot of times people's perceptions of what they believe is an area of crime does not match up with actual statistics," Hayes said.

When one woman asked if the cameras will be used to prosecute for minor crimes, such as littering and parking violations, Jenkins said that is not the intention of the grant.

"We don't have the desire, personnel or time to be using cameras for even things like minor in possession of alcohol or littering. We don't intend to use the cameras that way," Jenkins said. "But if we happen to see a situation where we think safety is in danger, then we will intervene."

Though the grant has already been accepted by Pullman Police and approved by the City Council, Andrea New, a representative from Schweitzer Engineering Laboratories, read a letter during the meeting from CEO Edmund Schweitzer, stating why he is against use of the cameras. Schweitzer said that installing the cameras is "Orwellian," adding that violent crime is not a Pullman problem, that the city should have refused the money from the government and that the \$300,000 system may be costly to maintain once the grant period is over.

"I was disappointed to see the city go ahead and accept the money, and now waste additional resources planning, obtaining and operating these surveillance systems," Schweitzer wrote.

He said his recommendation is to not purchase the equipment and to return the money: "The country is broke."

Jenkins responded that students should be free to go to the Adams Mall area at night without fear of being assaulted.

"We have between 20 and 30 serious assaults a year on College Hill, including students that have their jaws broken and their legs broken," Jenkins said. "Even though we don't have the big numbers like Chicago and Washington, D.C., we do have some serious assaults occur ... things that, in our mind, are just not acceptable."

Jenkins also reminded constituents that there will be signs indicating that a camera is installed at every spot monitored, and there are no plans to use facial recognition software.

The grant requires that police must engage an educational institute to help with research and analysis. So, Pullman Police are partnering with Zachary Hayes and Mike Gaffney in the Washington State Institute for Criminal Justice and the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, both at Washington State University. They will help the city to determine how the cameras affect crime in Pullman and how they affect the people who live there.

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