

Norfolk | fighting crime

YOU ARE UNDER SURVEILLANCE

BUT IS IT HELPING SECURITY? RESULTS ARE MIXED.

The city installs cameras in its parking garages

By Matthew Bowers

The Virginian-Pilot

The city has been quietly installing surveillance cameras in its downtown parking garages – a move brought on by security concerns and welcomed by many residents and visitors.

“We’re really happy to have it finally be a reality,” said Kevin R. Murphy, president of the Downtown Norfolk Civic League, who for years has advocated them.

Surveillance cameras are a new crime-fighting tool for Norfolk, where cameras also went up last year in three high-crime neighborhoods. Early indications about their effectiveness are mixed. Police say they’ve helped solve a homicide and are discouraging loiterers in Olde Huntersville; civic leaders in Denby Park say they haven’t seen much difference.

Police are still assessing their impact.

Downtown safety concerns heightened last March after a high-profile fatal shooting during a fight over a fenderbender in the Waterside garage. That came just days after a shootout involving a bicycle patrolman on a downtown street that left a robbery-murder suspect dead.

A more common downtown concern are complaints about vehicle break-ins.

The first of 134 cameras planned for 15 city garages started going up in December, said Bob Batcher Jr., a city spokesman. The Waterside, Freemason Street and Main Street facilities were completed by late January, and preparatory work had begun in the York Street garage, he said.

The cameras won’t be monitored, but digital recordings will be kept for 30 days. Signal Engineering Corp., which has an office in Hampton, is handling the \$1.5 million job.

The cameras already have helped police on at least one case – a January assault in the Freemason Street garage, said Master Police Officer Chris Amos, a department spokesman. He gave no details because the case was still in the court system.

Casey Allison, 21, of Virginia Beach, was surprised but glad to see a shiny white canister capped by a clear dome in the Waterside garage.

“I think it’s a good idea,” she said. “It’s a prime target spot for crime.”

Good idea, but not perfect – Allison said she’ll continue to avoid downtown at night because she’s still worried about safety.

Sharon Hogan, owner of Erin’s Treasures inside Waterside, said she has had no problems in 27 years of using the garage. But she also welcomed the cameras.

“I can only think it’d be a positive thing,” she said.

Murphy, of the civic league, wants the city to follow up by quickly posting signs about cameras to warn potential perpetrators and deter loiterers.

Batcher cautioned that cameras won’t solve everything. Customers need to use common sense, such as hiding valuables.

“The goal for the cameras is for them to be able to see the entire garage,” Batcher said. But, “just because there are cameras doesn’t mean you shouldn’t lock your car. It’s still important to be smart – not scared, but smart.”

The cameras in the three city neighborhoods were installed last year as a one-year pilot program under Project Focus, a comprehensive anticrime, anti-blight effort.

The results have been mixed after little more than half a year, an interim police study shows. Violent and property crimes are down in some cases and up in others in the zones covered by cameras in Denby Park near Wards Corner, Olde Huntersville near downtown and Pleasant Avenue in East Ocean View.

Detectives credited them with helping solve a September homicide in Denby Park: The suspect pleaded guilty last month and is awaiting sentencing. Lt. Franklin Allgood Jr., who's helping oversee the neighborhood cameras, said loitering has almost disappeared from a Huntersville neighborhood store.

No one has disturbed the cameras, which are intentionally visible, Allgood said. Police will analyze about nine month's worth of crime and arrest data in the camera zones and surrounding neighborhoods before recommending any changes to the program .

Leaders of the Oakdale Farms/Denby Park Civic League praised police but said they've been disappointed in the impact of the cameras.

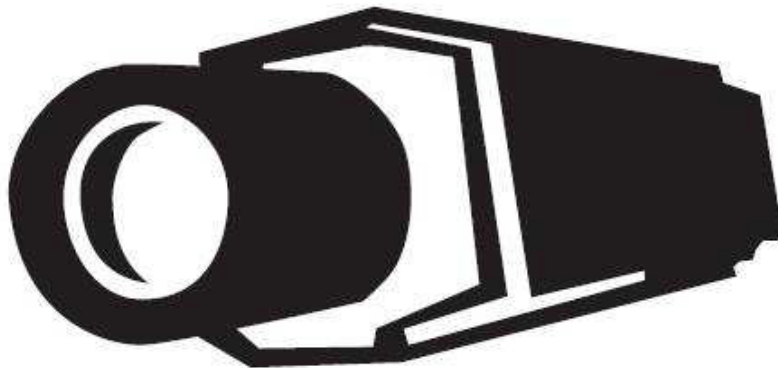
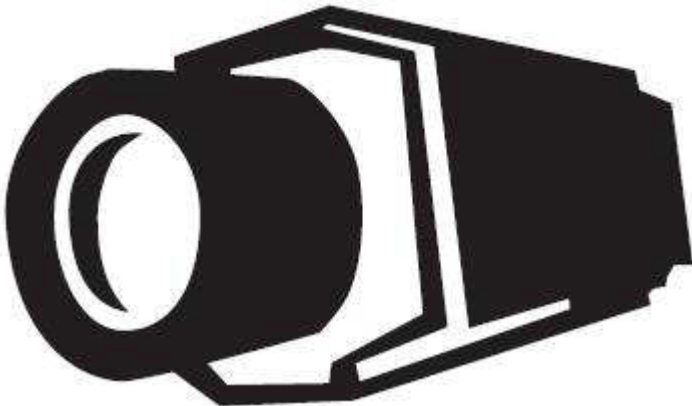
They thought they'd be monitored full time, and they look out their windows and see drug dealers congregating beneath one camera, said Rebecca Luce, the league's president.

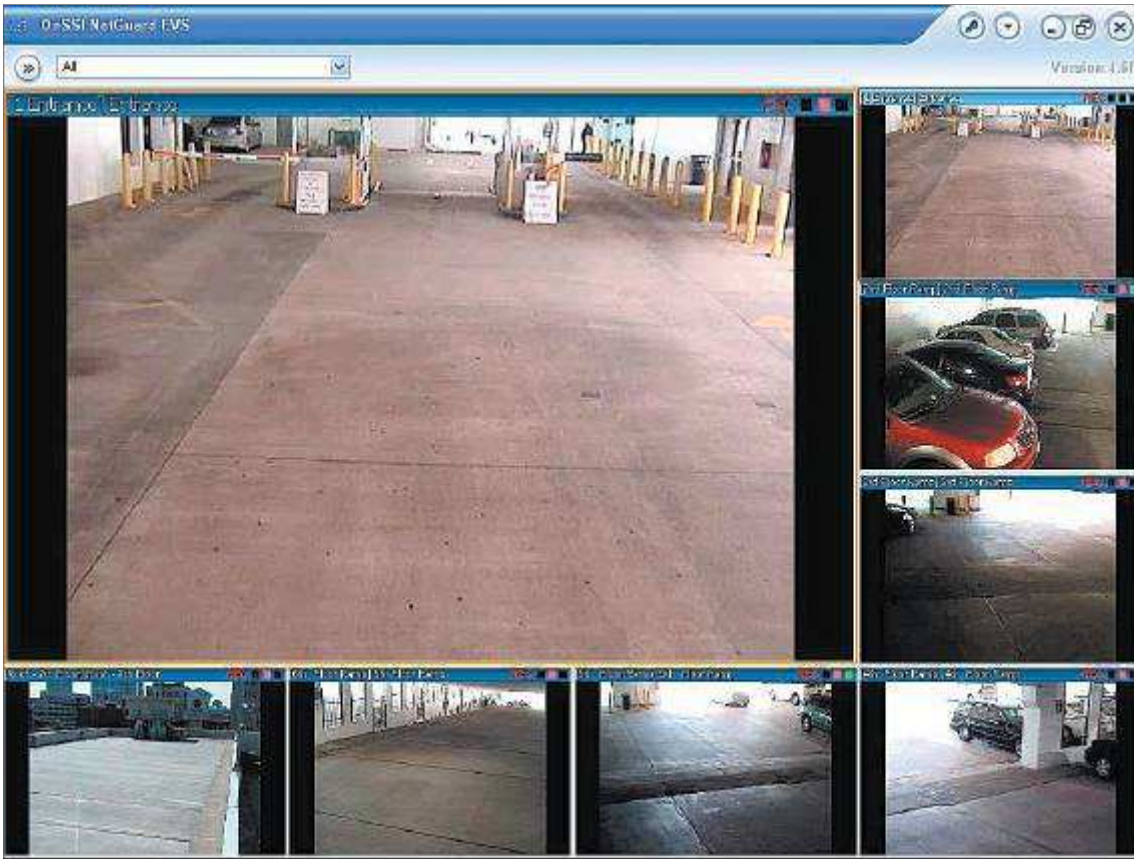
"Initially it was a deterrent," Luce said. "The fear of the unknown – they didn't know whether they were on or not."

Beverly Sexton, league vice president, witnessed gunshots one night last summer, but said the recording police showed her was too grainy to be helpful. Police said that any early quality problems have been resolved.

"We were hoping the cameras would have been a tool to help them," Sexton said. "And I really don't think it has worked out that way."

Matthew Bowers, (757) 222-3893, matthew.bowers@pilotonline.com





COURTESY OF NORFOLK

Above are video images of the Freemason Street garage in downtown Norfolk. Security cameras there helped police in one case last month, the city says.