

Posted on Thu, Dec. 20, 2007

Police bolster ability to monitor the streets

By Vernon Clark

Inquirer Staff Writer



Hailing Philadelphia's police surveillance camera system as "a huge deterrent to crime," Mayor Street and police officials yesterday unveiled a new monitoring station at police headquarters.

"I can tell you that in areas and corners where there are video surveillance cameras, crime goes down," Street said during a news conference inside the amphitheater-style monitoring room. "They are a huge deterrent to crime, and they make life better for so many people in our neighborhoods."

The room features nearly a dozen desktop-computerized stations in addition to a wall-size video panel, viewed by officers.

As part of the mayor's Operation Safer Streets initiative to combat crime, the city contracted with Unisys Corp. to install 250 video surveillance cameras throughout the city. So far, 26 cameras are operating, and the others are expected to be running in the next 10 months.

The total cost is \$10 million, officials said. They said \$8.9 million would be used for the cameras and \$1.1 million for the monitoring room.

Deputy Police Commissioner Jack Gaittens said the cameras would not replace police officers and the new system means "response time will be greatly reduced."

Demonstrating the system, a police official contacted two bicycle patrol officers on a street corner and then displayed on a large screen a video image of their working on a city block.

Chief Inspector Michael Feeney, who has worked closely on the system, said as many as 1,000 cameras could be effectively monitored from the control center.

Councilman Darrell Clarke, an early advocate of surveillance cameras, praised the system and said he hoped cameras would be added.

"It allows us to prevent crime but also deal with significant quality-of-life issues," he said. "We are looking at the start of the next administration for providing a contract for an additional 750 cameras."

Councilwoman Donna Reed Miller, who has strongly supported the use of the cameras, said residents have embraced the system.

"It means increased public safety and a feeling of security and safety in the neighborhoods," Miller said. "People want these cameras."

She noted that at Wayne Avenue and Seymour Street in Germantown, long a corner plagued by violence, there have been no slayings since a camera was installed this year.

"We haven't had one teddy bear or balloon" for a slaying victim there since the camera went up, she said.