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Businessman proposes more video security

His plan works with other local companies to sponsor cameras

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One downtown business owner is offering to give the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office more "eyes" on the street at no additional cost.

Mark Marques, president of Joytel Wireless, has begun shopping around an idea he calls Secure Jax. The plan calls for local companies to purchase and sponsor the maintenance of security cameras that would be monitored by the Sheriff's Office.

The goal is to have 86 security cameras monitoring nearly every corner in a square mile of downtown bordered by State, Washington and Broad streets all the way to the river.

In addition, Marques will equip the cameras with ShotSpotter, a gunfire detection system that can pinpoint the location where shots are fired within a few feet and can automatically direct officers and cameras to the area.

Marques, who lives and works downtown, said his plan could make the city safer. He presented his idea to a City Council committee last week and has also met with Sheriff John Rutherford.

"The sheriff finds their idea very interesting, and we are looking into it," said his spokeswoman, Lauri-Ellen Smith.

Jacksonville police already monitor at least 200 video cameras throughout the city, though it won't disclose exactly how many or their locations.

Many of those cameras were funded by a grant the city obtained to help increase security when it hosted the Super Bowl in 2005.

As recently as last year, the Sheriff's Office lobbied for more money to increase the number of cameras in high-crime neighborhoods.

However, there are concerns locally and around the world that video surveillance might not be the answer.

Ken Hurley, interim regional director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida Northeast Region, said he doesn't oppose the use of security cameras but thinks there should be clear rules before they are implemented.

One of his concerns is privacy rights, including the length of time footage is held in archives and who is provided access.

He also warns about the potential for abuse, especially voyeurism. "Who is watching the watchers?" he said.

The ACLU points out there is little evidence that security cameras deter crime or serve as an enforcement tool. In a position paper on its Web site, the ACLU points to studies showing that Great Britain's surveillance system, one of the most expansive programs in the world with 4.2 million cameras, hasn't reduced crime or citizens' fear of being victimized.

Last year, Jay Plotkin, chief assistant state attorney and a candidate for state attorney, told the Times-Union that he can't remember any cases where video footage was used as evidence and that such cameras aren't likely to catch anything that would be useful in court.

The Sheriff's Office said video cameras are more useful for spotting trends and potential trouble spots.

Marques said he is aware of the concerns and hopes to work with city agencies and the public to address all concerns before Secure Jax is rolled out. In the end, the decision rests with Rutherford.

He is already testing out two video cameras, one mounted at the top of the Chamblin's Uptown bookstore and the other on Park Street in Five Points.

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