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Focused on Downtown

Company proposes privately funded camera network

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DOWNTOWN -- The owner of a wireless Internet company serving Downtown and St. Augustine businesses has proposed a plan to equip Downtown with up to 94 cameras for police to monitor the area for crime at no cost to Jacksonville.

MEDIA



Mark Marques, president and CEO of Joytel Wireless Communications Inc., who lives and works Downtown, developed the idea in consultation with neighboring business owners who worry that people are deterred from going there by safety concerns.

"I walk to The [Jacksonville] Landing at night to see clients, and I often get harassed," Marques said.

The wireless camera system he has proposed offers advantages compared with a hardwired system, he said. The cameras are more readily deployable and aren't subject to having their wires cut. Also, such a network is more scalable; extra cameras can be added or removed as needed.

The cameras can swivel and zoom in from hundreds of feet away with sharp resolution. Their images could be called up on police car computers or even on handheld devices given to officers.

Marques would install monitoring equipment for the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office's exclusive use.

The system proposed could also include a gunshot locator system. If a gun is fired, nearby cameras would turn to the sound and pinpoint the location on a map.

Marques declined to say how much the system will cost, but he has pitched it to the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office on the premise that it will be funded privately and turned over

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to the JSO to operate.

The proposed funding mechanism involves soliciting sponsorships from businesses for one or more cameras. Signs could be affixed to each camera stating which company is supporting its installation and maintenance.

"It's kind of like adopt-a-highway, only for cameras," Marques said.

In addition, the proposal suggests the possibility of being able to embed a watermark of a sponsoring company's logo on the output from each camera. So if a camera detects activity that is aired on television news or reproduced in print, the watermark would be included.

Marques, with help from La Cena Ristorante owner Jerry Moran, is looking for a company to underwrite a pilot project involving eight cameras. If that is successful, he envisions adding 86 cameras.

Such a network would have more than twice as many cameras as the hardwired system the city has around the sports complex. Those cameras are used mainly to monitor traffic during sporting events and events at Metropolitan Park.

A system geared for public safety would require different training for officers assigned to monitor it, said JSO Chief Mark Richardson, chief of community affairs and special events.

Street-level view

Moran, who is chairman of the Sheriff's Advisory Council for the sector that includes Downtown, has high hopes that such a system will deter activities such as panhandling, indecency, criminal vagrancy, drug dealing and vehicle vandalism.

"I'm at street level," Moran said. "I see this all the time."

But he's seen such activity reduced since he began turning his restaurant's cameras toward the street.

"It seemed to be effective," he said. "I thought a video surveillance system for Downtown would be a good idea."

Others agree.

"I think cameras would provide an extra level of security, absolutely," said Terry Lorince, executive director of Downtown Vision Inc. "I see it as part of a long-term strategy."

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