Brookline wary of surveillance cameras

Residents resist installation push

By Michael Levenson
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Even as eight other cities and towns across Greater Boston prepare to more than double, to 183, the number of security cameras monitoring their streets, Brookline is threatening to reject the cameras, as town officials confront a brewing rebellion of residents decrying the rise of a "surveillance society."

A rejection would be unusual. Hundreds of cities and towns across the country - from Liberty, Kan., (population 95) to New York - have installed surveillance cameras funded by the US Department of Homeland Security in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Barry Steinhardt, director of the American Civil Liberties Union's technology and liberty program, said the city council in Washington, D.C., recently barred its mayor and police chief from accepting a federal grant to install the cameras. But he said he did not know of any other municipality in the country that had taken such a step.

In considering a rejection of the cameras, Brookline is thrusting itself into a roiling international debate over the merits of surveillance cameras and the limits of privacy in public places.

On one side are law enforcement officials who say the cameras can help them keep an eye on potential targets of terrorism, manage traffic during an emergency, and investigate street crime. On the other side are civil liberties groups and some residents who say the cameras could also be used to follow people going about their daily lives, even zooming in to see what books they are reading.

"The overarching concern is what kind of society are we creating, where general police surveillance cameras are in operation," said Sarah Wunsch, an attorney for the ACLU. "You cannot assume that we will always be a free society, and we are putting the structures in place that would allow a very different United States of America from the one we have lived in."

Wunsch, a Brookline resident, scoffed at the notion of the cameras' use as a traffic management tool during an emergency.

"The people who live in town laugh at that because the town can't prevent
gridlock at rush hour," she said. "To say these cameras are going to help traffic during an evacuation is, quite frankly, ludicrous. Using cameras for that purpose, most people think, is crazy."

Brookline Police Chief Daniel C. O'Leary said the cameras could help manage traffic and investigate crime. "It's a valuable tool that I don't want to lose, and I think the value goes beyond just managing an evacuation," he said. "There are everyday uses that a lot of people could benefit from."

He has proposed installing 12 cameras on the arms of traffic lights on Beacon Street, Route 9, and Longwood Avenue, among other locations. Police would monitor the cameras at headquarters and install a screen in the lobby to allow the public to view what the cameras are recording, he said. Footage would be stored for 30 days before it is automatically erased.

Even so, Nancy Daly, chairwoman of the Board of Selectmen, said she is worried about the potential for abuse. She cited an incident in 2004, when gruesome footage of a suicide captured by a police camera in a Bronx housing project was leaked to a website featuring violent videos.

"This is pretty controversial here," she said. "We all have great respect for the chief, so I think people are reluctant to go against him on something he wants. But there are some serious issues involved here, so I think it's still up in the air."

After two contentious hearings during which about 40 residents testified in opposition to the cameras, Daly said she is "leaning against" approval of the cameras and believes the board could reject them. A vote is scheduled for Jan. 6.

The first batch of cameras in Greater Boston went up on roads, bridges, and buildings just before the Democratic National Convention in 2004, after nine cities and towns received a $4.6 million grant from the Homeland Security Department.

Boston installed 44 cameras, Chelsea 27, Everett 10, and Revere seven. Now, under the second phase of the program, Boston is to receive by spring 30 additional cameras, Chelsea an additional nine, Everett three more, and Revere nine more. In addition, Cambridge is to receive eight cameras, Quincy eight, Winthrop nine, Somerville seven, and Brookline its 12.

The bulb-shaped Bosch IP cameras can tilt, zoom, and pan 360 degrees. One community is allowed to view scenes from another's network when it obtains permission from that community's police. In communities other than Brookline, the cameras were installed quietly and without a vote.

"There was no debate in Boston," said Robert P. Dunford, superintendent in chief of police in Boston. "Obviously, there are some people who look at it as an invasion of privacy, but we're not looking at anything that's not already public."

Boston's cameras, he said, monitor traffic for the Transportation Department in City Hall. An officer at headquarters also monitors the cameras 16 hours a day, and police have used the footage to investigate several shootings, he said. The city is now looking at ways to make its cameras swivel in the direction of shootings recorded by the acoustic gunshot detection system.

"They've been very useful," said Brian A. Kyes, chief of police in Chelsea, which has used its cameras to investigate bank robberies, car accidents and shootings.
"We’re able to go back into the archive and capture some pertinent information for our investigation."

"This is some of the price all of us have to pay for living in a free society, but a threatened society," said David B. Goldstein, Winthrop's police chief, who said his cameras will monitor Logan Airport, the Deer Island Sewage Treatment Plant, and the Belle Isle bridge.

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