80 Eyes on 2,400 People

If terrorists come to tiny Dillingham, Alaska, security cameras will be ready. But privacy concerns have residents up in arms.

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DILLINGHAM, Alaska — From Anchorage it takes 90 minutes on a propeller plane to reach this fishing village on the state's southwestern edge, a place where some people still make raincoats out of walrus intestine.

This is the Alaskan bush at its most remote. Here, tundra meets sea, and sea turns to ice for half the year. Scattered, almost hidden, in the terrain are some of the most isolated communities on American soil. People choose to live in outposts like Dillingham (pop. 2,400) for that reason: to be left alone.

So eyebrows were raised in January when the first surveillance cameras went up on Main Street. Each camera is a shiny white metallic box with two lenses like eyes. The camera's shape and design resemble a robot's head.

Workers on motorized lifts installed seven cameras in a 360-degree cluster on top of City Hall. They put up groups of six atop two light poles at the loading dock, and more at the fire hall and boat harbor.

By mid-February, more than 60 cameras watched over the town, and the Dillingham Police Department plans to install 20 more — all purchased through a $202,000 Homeland Security grant meant primarily to defend against a terrorist attack.

Now the residents of this far-flung village have become, in one sense, among the most watched people in the land, with — as former Mayor Freeman Roberts puts it — "one camera for every 30 residents."

Some don't mind, but many others are furious and have banded together to force the city to take the cameras down.

"You better smile. You're on camera," says Roberts, 64, a barge captain. Roberts himself isn't smiling as he points out a single camera on the side of a building. The camera is aimed toward an alley.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" he says. He drives around town in his pickup, spying on the cameras that he believes are spying on him. "Everywhere you look, there's one looking at you."

Roberts, mayor of Dillingham from 1972 to 1978, says the cameras constitute an invasion of privacy, and beyond that, they're just plain creepy. He scratched together a petition demanding removal of the cameras and collected 219 signatures within days.

The City Council, which supports the cameras, threw out the petition, claiming Roberts did not follow the law, which requires that the signatories be registered voters. Now Roberts is working with others to put together a legal petition to force the issue on the October ballot.

Roberts climbs out of his truck and slams the door.
He is a square-jawed man with a slow, deliberate way of talking. He looks out at Nushagak Bay, which remains frozen until the end of April. No boat can enter or leave the harbor until the ice breaks up. He shakes his head. “This is Dillingham, Alaska, folks,” he says. “I don’t think we have to worry about Osama bin Laden.”

That is, unless Bin Laden wants to go salmon fishing.

Dillingham is a hub in the Bristol Bay region, which is famous among fishermen for its sockeye runs.

The inhabitants of about 30 nearby villages come to town for supplies. Slightly more than half the residents of Dillingham are Native Alaskans. The rest are white or mixed, like Roberts, who is Dutch and Yupik Eskimo.

The village has a rumpled, flophouse feel to it, as if collapsed together by a strong wind from the Bering Sea: faded cedar shacks next to aluminum buildings next to dusty lots of dry-docked fishing boats tipped at all kinds of angles.

It is a working town in the middle of what some might call nowhere, which, according to Police Chief Richard Thompson, is why residents must be vigilant. Terrorists intent on attacking the United States could, he says, "backdoor it" through a nowhere dot on the tundra just like Dillingham.

Thompson, with the blessing of the City Council, applied for the Homeland Security grant last year. He is 51, wiry, with a slightly harried air about him. He has spent 22 years in the Dillingham Police Department, starting as dispatcher and becoming chief a year and a half ago.

It's his department. He and his six officers take the oath to protect very seriously. He bristles at any reference to Big Brother.

"Tokyo is that way," says Thompson, extending his arm to the left. He’s standing near the spot in the harbor where Roberts stood the previous day.

"Russia is about 800 miles that way," he says, arm extending right.

"Seattle is about 1,200 miles back that way." He points behind him.

"So if I have the math right, we’re closer to Russia than we are to Seattle."

Now imagine, he says: What if the bad guys, whoever they are, manage to obtain a nuclear device in Russia, where some weapons are believed to be poorly guarded. They put the device in a container and then hire organized criminals, "maybe Mafiosi," to arrange a tramp steamer to pick it up. The steamer drops off the container at the Dillingham harbor, complete with forged paperwork to ship it to Seattle. The container is picked up by a barge.

"Ten days later," the chief says, "the barge pulls into the Port of Seattle."

Thompson pauses for effect.

"Phoooom," he says, his hands blooming like a flower.

"Farfetched? My view is we pay people like me to think of the ‘what ifs,’ " Thompson says. The cameras would help authorities monitor who is entering and leaving the port. If something bad happens, the cameras at the very least could help identify suspects.

"I'd be willing to bet that's a good reason why we got the grant," Thompson says. "The government, I think, understands the potential."

The Department of Homeland Security, which gave Alaska more than $16 million in grants last year, takes seriously the threat of terrorists infiltrating the country through remote border areas.

"Once a terrorist is inside Alaska, that person is inside the United States," says David Liebersbach, director of the Alaska Division of Homeland Security.

"Phoooom," Thompson says again.
plasma screens on a wall show live video of street scenes, parking lots, building entrances and locations around the harbor.

From this room, a dispatcher will monitor the busiest parts of town around the clock. Officers can also follow a crime in progress. Thompson hopes the cameras will help in day-to-day crime-fighting. During fishing season, a large transient population comes to town, and drugs and alcohol become a problem. Quaint little Dillingham, he says, becomes "a rough little town."


Thompson tells the story of a skipper, John Henry, 51, who one winter night in 2004 fell asleep on the beach and froze to death. Today, a camera watches over the spot where he died. Thompson says if a camera had been there that night, police could have saved Henry.

Thompson says he doesn't have the time or interest to spy on people.

The town leadership stands behind him. Mayor Chris Napoli said the city posted the Homeland Security grant as an agenda item in a council meeting last year. He said the meeting "was poorly attended" — a nice way of saying nobody came. The subject of surveillance cameras was not mentioned in the meeting notice. On June 2, 2005, the council adopted a resolution accepting the grant.

Napoli doesn't understand the fuss. "We had an opportunity to enhance security and we took advantage of it," he says. "I thought we were doing what government officials are supposed to do."

The mayor, who runs a gas station and convenience store across from the police station, bought his own surveillance camera for the store. The banks and grocery stores in town have had surveillance cameras for years. The hospital uses cameras, and the public housing authority two years ago installed 25 cameras at its apartment complex.

Says high school wrestling coach Johnny Johnson: "If you're not doing anything wrong, what does it matter?"

Tim Smeekens and his wife moved from Oregon to Alaska eight years ago, living for a time in a tiny native village. A job as a social worker brought Smeekens to Dillingham five years later.

He has taken over the petition drive started by Roberts, consulting with a lawyer to put together a referendum on the cameras. Based on the number of people who voted in the last election, Smeekens says, he'll need at most about 100 signatures.

"Not a problem," he says over breakfast at Fisherman's Cafe.

It's a one-room restaurant with low ceilings and no discernible heat. The temperature hovers around zero. The clientele is a rough-looking crowd. Two men at a nearby table talk about bear-hunting, one claiming to have shot a "brownie" that had a 28-inch skull.

By contrast, Smeekens looks dapper. He is 53 with roundish glasses that give him a professorial look. The town leaders "assumed they could put up these cameras and nobody would mind," Smeekens says. "Know what? We mind.

"I value privacy. It's the birthright of every American," he says. The surveillance cameras represent "a chipping away of that right."

Smeekens says he's fighting over principle. But many others eager to sign the petition have more pragmatic or personal concerns.

"I guess we have to be mindful not to pick our noses in public," says Donna Shade, owner of a bed and breakfast. She describes herself as someone who naturally feels guilty anyway.

"It's a Catholic thing," she says. The cameras bolster the sense that "we're not trustworthy."

Ronnie Heyano, a fisherman, sums up his concerns: "Who will be watching the watchers?"

Later that afternoon, Roberts, the barge captain, is driving around in his truck again.

Barge work is hard to come by as long as there's ice in Nushagak Bay; he'll have time to spare until May. He spends much time giving townspeople tours of the camera sites.
“Here’s one thing that really ticks people off. See that building?” says Roberts, gesturing toward an old one-story structure near City Hall. It’s the Bristol Bay Counseling Center, a mental health facility.

“There are people embarrassed to go in there because they think those cameras are taking pictures of them,” Roberts says. “You’re never going to hear from them.”

On a road behind City Hall, Roberts stops his truck to talk to a fellow barge captain who has stopped his own pickup. Two idling trucks, two rolled-down windows, two men swapping news in the middle of the street. It’s a common scene in town.

“Watch out. Osama’s going to get you,” Roberts says.

“Big Brother’s going to get you first,” says the other skipper, Dennis Johnson.

Roberts asks if he’s a registered voter. Johnson says yes and reminds Roberts to tell him when the petition is ready. The men fall silent, their truck engines quietly rumbling. With a short crisp nod, Roberts drives off.

Roberts says if the petition fails, he may do the unthinkable: run for mayor again. He predicts he’d win and there would be a few people at City Hall looking for new jobs.

He heaves a sigh.

“Dillingham, Alaska,” he says simply, his tone implying the lament: What has happened to you?