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Law enforcement tool

West Covina police want to put cameras in cruisers

By Ruby Gonzales
Staff Writer

Saturday, December 18, 2004 - WEST COVINA -- Monday night in the city. A car in the left-turn lane decides to go forward instead of turning. The driver gets pulled over by an officer.

It would be hard to question the officer's decision. A camera in the patrol car recorded the incident.

Since September, West Covina police have been testing a system that allows officers to video record from their patrol car. It's in two of the black-and-whites. Police hope to buy the two they were testing with either asset-forfeiture money or a federal tech grant.

The Sequent Ranger 350i is a mobile digital video surveillance system from Global ePoint in Industry. The camera used isn't digital.

"We need these systems in the patrol cars," police Chief Frank Wills said. "This has such potential in increasing public confidence in municipal police departments."

Not that the public lacks confidence in their local police, he added. And there's not one case that triggered the need for cameras in the patrol cars, Wills said.

He said such a system protects officers as well. Their goal is to identify a source of funding for the next fiscal year.

The wireless system, which looks like a black box, is mounted in the trunk and costs about \$3,200 each. With the camera, microphone and installation, it's about \$5,000, according to Tim Miller, account executive with Global ePoint.

Global ePoint approached West Covina to test the Ranger 350i. The system was installed in two training cars. The camera can zoom in. The system records in snippets from less than a minute to five minutes, Miller said.

Officers don't need to remove any discs or download anything themselves. When a patrol car returns to the station, any recorded data is automatically uploaded by a server in the station.

The recording can be viewed in a computer at the briefing room, said Lt. Mike Dettor.

There are several ways to activate the system: when the light bar is turned on, via the wireless mike, manually, or when a shotgun is pulled out of its holder. The system tested by West Covina doesn't have the latter option.

He was opposed to having cameras in patrol cars when he was LAPD chief for a whole variety of reasons, said Daryl Gates, who is vice president of business development for Global ePoint.

The technology was in its infancy and relied on tapes, he said. The department would have to store a lot of tapes.

"The technology has changed and our society has become more complicated dealing with issues," Gates said.

He said that's why you're seeing cameras on traffic signals.

"You are protected by your local police, not the CIA, FBI. They're the ones that need the technology and the last ones to get anything," Gates said.

Riverside police bought the Ranger 350i last year and installed it in 13 patrol cars.

Under a stipulated judgment Riverside entered with the attorney general in March 5, 2001, the city must distribute audio recorders to all officers and sergeants in the field operations division. To supplement that, it must put video cameras on 10 patrol cars.

The agreement, which outlines what the city needs to do, was the result of an investigation by the attorney general into past patterns and practices by the Riverside Police Department.

The Ranger 350i is a resource that's been valuable especially in the field, according to Riverside Officer Phil Fernandez.

They've received no complaints from the officers, he said. Fernandez said Riverside spent \$489,000 for the system.

"From our point of view, as far as the deployment and use of it, it's a valuable tool," he said. "If someone is alleging something occurred and it's captured on video, that's very valuable."

Police departments in Santa Ana, Brea and New Jersey are also testing the system, Gates said.

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