

Eyes up high: Surveillance cameras and policing in downtown Boone

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One night in 2016, a vehicle veered onto a King Street curb and struck one of the town's solar-powered trash compactors, causing about \$7,000 worth of damage. The driver took off. No police officers were in the area, but the incident didn't go unseen. Boone Police had recently installed high-definition surveillance cameras in downtown Boone on a trial basis.

"The camera was clear enough that they were able to get a very detailed vehicle description, saw where he had turned up Depot Street, (and we) come to the neighborhood and there's the car in the driveway," recalled Boone Police Officer Glen Kornhauser, who's assigned to downtown Boone. "A crime that, unless a police officer just happened to be right there, it would have gone unsolved."

"And right there's a crime that the taxpayer would have footed the bill for," added Boone Police Chief Dana Crawford. "That essentially paid one year for that camera — being able to solve that crime."

Police believe the new HD cameras have dramatically improved their ability to solve cases in downtown Boone, and, they say, it's important to use these tools responsibly. Many local leaders and merchants are supportive of the cameras — noting that surveillance is a fact of life in today's society — but there are differences on how, where and when to educate the public about them.

Not the only ones

Downtown, there are two Tsunami four-megapixel camera systems from a Murrells Inlet, S.C.-based company called Ocean 10 Security. Each system has four cameras, providing a 360-degree view of hundreds of feet of the surrounding area, according to the company website. Designated users can access the video, it stated, from "a secure connection anywhere in the world."

The Tsunami systems are not the first surveillance cameras in downtown Boone. They've been in place at private establishments since the mid-1980s, Crawford said, and he estimated that about two-thirds of downtown businesses have some type of recording system inside or outside of stores. But police say that while useful, these cameras vary in quality or could be pointed in directions that aren't beneficial.

"The quality is one of the things that is so much better with the Tsunami," said Crawford, "(and) we can move cameras around a little bit if we need to."

And although police continue to use footage from privately owned cameras, the private files can sometimes present problems in court related to rules of evidence, Kornhauser said.

Police installed a Tsunami camera system on a trial basis in summer 2016, and in October that year, police presented information to the Downtown Boone Development Association, which administers municipal tax district revenues. The DBDA board agreed to split the costs with the department for two camera systems; each system costs \$5,600 per year to lease, which covers upkeep and data storage. Boone Town Manager John Ward provided information on the new cameras to the Boone Town Council in December 2016. He said the expenses were approved as part of the department's annual budget.

Police: Cameras help solve cases

Police say the cameras are utilized primarily in solving crimes such as larcenies and property damage, including graffiti, and Crawford and Kornhauser credit the use of the Tsunami and other downtown cameras in combination with the High Country Crime Stoppers tip program for a high solve rate on these types of offenses.

Of 37 larcenies reported downtown between Sept. 1, 2016, and Dec. 1, 2017, of those, 23 were solved, resulting in 33 people cited with misdemeanor or felony charges, Kornhauser said. Among the other cases, nine were unsolved, three cases remain open and in two, business owners declined prosecution. Of the unsolved cases, five were incidents where no video footage had been obtained, he added. Crawford said there were 91 cases last year in which cameras assisted in solving a crime; 41 of those cases were solved utilizing the Tsunami video system specifically.

“If you tell people why you're doing something, they say it makes sense. We try to be open about it, and we have nothing to hide.”

- Boone Police Chief Dana Crawford

In a November 2017 statement about arrests in a graffiti incident, Kornhauser was quoted as saying, “Over 90 percent of reported crimes in the downtown Boone business area have been solved due to the partnership between business owners, citizens and High Country Crime Stoppers through the use of the Tsunami video surveillance systems.”

“Not joking,” Kornhauser said in December, “I can post a picture (via Crime Stoppers or media outlets) on Friday and come in on Monday with seven or eight phone calls. I've had three incidents when people have turned themselves in as soon as they've seen their pictures. That's encouraging.”

The cameras have also been used to track vehicles involved in hit-and-runs or people being pursued by law enforcement. It can be used to monitor traffic during big events: Kornhauser accessed the system to observe crowd flow in downtown Boone during the App State vs. Miami football game. And in one instance in the past, Crawford said surveillance cameras confirmed a woman's suspicions that she was being stalked by an unknown man.

Detect and deter

Police hope that sharing the surveillance videos, stills and results of solved cases via media outlets will serve as a crime deterrent.

“That's the idea. That's what we want,” Crawford said. “We didn't have the manpower to put someone downtown at night. It really does help serve as a deterrent for us. It gives us a set of eyes that we didn't have.”

“I would much rather deter crime than catch crime,” Kornhauser emphasized. “When people know that the downtown area is 80 percent covered by cameras, that’s going to deter crime.”

And the presence of the cameras can be reassuring to downtown merchants, local residents and families of students, the chief added.

“It’s a safety issue for a lot of folks,” he said. “I’ve talked to a lot of parents ... they call you and they want to know, ‘Well how safe is Boone?’”

Boone Mayor Rennie Brantz said he hears positive feedback on the cameras.

“After getting some reports from various people and from a number of citizens who feel that downtown Boone is safe, I think it is probably working to have surveillance cameras there,” he said.

Anna Roseman — owner of Anna Banana’s clothing consignment store and a member of the DBDA board — said she’s a “big fan” of the systems, noting she has installed cameras inside her business as well. The Tsunami system helped identify someone who threw a rock that broke one of her store windows.

“Those expenses add up,” Roseman said. “I resisted in the beginning putting them in my store, but I just found it, unfortunately, to be necessary to document some things. People make mistakes, but as a small business owner, to survive in this marketplace, I had to become more aware and armed with that sort of information.”

Lynne Mason, a town council member and co-owner of Lost Province Brewing Co. on Depot Street, echoed Roseman’s sentiments, noting that surveillance footage led to her business receiving compensation for property damage and other offenses.

“If there were no cameras, there would be no likely resolution. And as a small business owner, each little event adds up over time,” Mason said.

No one ‘watching cameras all day’

Boone Police say they review the surveillance footage after a crime has been reported, and — with the exception of occasional event or weather observations — do not monitor the cameras in real time.

“We don’t have anybody watching cameras all day,” Crawford said. “In real time,” Kornhauser noted, “my primary responsibility is to respond to the crime — not to check the camera systems.”

But cities around the country are showing interest in Charlotte, which in recent years has established a Real Time Crime Center. Located on the second floor of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police headquarters, the center has access to more than 1,000 video cameras throughout the jurisdiction, as well as over 100 license plate readers that capture more than 1.5 million tag numbers per week, according to the department. Generally, the center is staffed 20 hours per day with two to three officers. When a call comes in, detectives utilize the real-time information available at the center, including the status of electronic monitoring devices on persons released on probation or bail.

In Chicago, since 2003, police officers have used PODs (police observation devices) — which can be remotely zoomed in and out and rotated — to monitor high-crime areas and school zones.

“I don’t see that happening here,” Crawford said, referring to Charlotte’s center.

Back in Boone, any officer can view the Tsunami surveillance camera video, but to make a copy for court purposes, a request must be made to Sgt. Matt Stevens, the department’s forensic digital evidence technician. No officers have the ability to edit or delete the videos. The retention period for the Tsunami cameras is approximately three weeks, with the systems recording over any video that is older than that. Ocean 10 Security does not retain any of the town’s data but does have the ability to log on and perform maintenance and upgrades, Crawford said.

As private surveillance footage is often provided to police for investigations, some business representatives have requested that they be able to obtain Tsunami surveillance footage to aid in civil lawsuits or property damage claims. Police are exploring options for release of footage for such purposes.

In addition, officers must make a request to Stevens for footage from body and dashboard cameras. This creates a paper trail so that leaders can track how video is being used, police say. The retention periods for these types of videos differ based on the category of the video and whether or not an incident is still pending in court.

Department leaders say these features help protect against potential misuse of the systems. There are real-life examples: A Washington, D.C. police lieutenant was charged with extortion in 1997 after he reportedly blackmailed visitors to a gay bar after tracking them using their license plate numbers. In a two-year study of British closed-circuit television control rooms in the 1990s, researchers Clive Norris and Gary Armstrong found multiple instances of operators surveilling women or couples for voyeuristic reasons.

Are laws keeping up?

In years past, the town council discussed surveillance cameras and questioned whether they would infringe on individual rights to privacy. But since the cameras have been installed, police, Mason and Brantz say they haven’t heard any concerns.

“We all likely have become more accustomed to knowing that there are cameras pretty much everywhere we go,” said Mason. “Other people are taking videos with their phones ... anytime you walk into likely most businesses now, there’s some type of surveillance going on.”

Added Crawford, “What privacy would a camera be capturing that the naked eye wouldn’t be capturing? The courts are real clear about when you’re out in public, how you present yourself to the naked eye, there is no expectation of privacy in that.”

“Any technology that tracks your location can really reveal a lot about you. A lot of where you go is who you are.”

- Mike Meno, ACLU of NC

But new Council Member Sam Furgiuele, who was the Boone town attorney from 2001 to 2014, said he was surprised by the installation of the cameras given the council’s past discussions on the matter. He said he intends to ask questions about the cameras, their efficacy, policies on storage and what the town is trying to accomplish by using them.

“I have concerns about privacy,” he said, noting the images that are often shared with media outlets. “I don’t see cameras as a substitute for actual law enforcement officers on the ground. In terms of dissuading crime, it seems to me that police presence would be more effective,” he added.

Organizations like the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) and [Cato Institute](#) for years have sounded alarms about surveillance and the implications for constitutional rights. Though cameras have grown more common in today’s society, Mike Meno, ACLU of North Carolina communications director, said there’s still a need for clear laws and oversight of government surveillance.

“We don’t have sort of a blanket position against the use of these cameras, but . . . there has to be a balance between public security and respecting everybody’s privacy rights,” said Meno. “It’s important for people to realize that even if they’re in public spaces, any technology that tracks your location can really reveal a lot about you. A lot of where you go is who you are.”

The combination of fixed surveillance cameras, dashboard cams, body cams, license plate readers and cell phone tracking gives government a lot of power to map where people go and how they spend their time, he added, and noted that North Carolina has very few statewide standards on the use of surveillance technology.

“At the end of the day, it’s important that the law and people’s understanding of their privacy expectations catch up to the pace of technology,” Meno said.

Telltale signs

“What’s key here is that officials have to be transparent,” Meno added, and he said one best practice is providing notice, or signs, that specific areas are under surveillance. But that’s an issue over which local leaders are divided.

“I don’t know that signage is necessary,” said Crawford, positing that it can clutter the landscape and be overlooked. “I think most folks understand or suspect that they are on camera in most public places, so I don’t know how effective signs would be.”

With regard to educating the public about surveillance, Crawford said, “I think we’ve done a pretty good job with Crime Stoppers and with our press releases of giving credit to the cameras when we’re able to use those to solve a crime.”

Mason said it’s reasonable for a government to disclose the presence of cameras, but the best way to do so is up for discussion. It also raises a bigger question, she said: What are the responsibilities of private businesses and individuals to give notice of video recordings?

Brantz said he supports signage: “We should make it clear that there are such cameras installed or working all the time. We need to constantly remind people and educate people that they’re there.”

“People make mistakes, but as a small business owner, to survive in this marketplace, I had to become more aware and armed with that sort of information.”

- Anna Roseman, owner of Anna Banana's

At Anna Banana’s, Roseman said that with a couple of signs, she tries to strike a balance that makes shoppers aware but doesn’t overdo it. “We do feel responsible to let people know. I would

appreciate that as a shopper in other stores. (But) we don't want people to think we think you are all criminals — that's not the vibe I want to put out.”

Roseman acknowledged the “Big Brother” image associated with surveillance cameras, but feels they can prevent problems from growing worse.

“It wasn't available years ago, and now it is. I feel like (with) the adjustment we've made to personal technology, then surely technology that provides safety and peace of mind could be worth opening up to.”

Kornhauser said merchants have asked when the town will place cameras at more locations. Crawford suggested additional sites could include Howard Street, the Wendy's intersection and the N.C. 105 Bypass and N.C. 105 intersection.

“We want to make sure that we've got the safest environment that we can possibly have downtown, and I think cameras are a part of that,” Crawford said. “If you tell people why you're doing something, they say it makes sense. We try to be open about it, and we have nothing to hide.”