

Surveillance cameras help deter crime, manage traffic

And in the Spokane area, they are becoming ubiquitous

Jody Lawrence-Turner
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Tags: downtown spokane partnership FBI Frank Harrill Marla Nunberg Pig Out in the Park River Park Square security cameras Spokane City Hall Spokane Transit Authority surveillance traffic management cameras video surveillance



Mike Hill keeps an eye on security monitors at the STA Plaza in downtown Spokane on Friday.

Maybe Rockwell's 1984 song "Somebody's Watching Me," about the fear of being watched, foretold the future of surveillance.

The chorus, "I always feel like somebody's watching me. I have no privacy," is certainly true in places like New York and Chicago, where manned surveillance stations keep an eye on hundreds of square miles. It isn't too far from reality in downtown Spokane, either.

Keeping tabs

Live video feeds are trained on about 50 intersections in Spokane County.

With Pig Out in the Park starting Wednesday at Riverfront Park, people will be flooding the downtown area. If a person does something criminal, embarrassing or even heroic, chances are it will be caught on camera.

"Video surveillance is in homes ... businesses ... it's growing," said Frank Harrill, FBI supervisor for Eastern Washington.

Security cameras now keep watch around the River Park Square mall and inside its garage, Spokane City Hall, the Spokane Transit Authority Plaza, the Federal Building, the post office, KHQ, The Spokesman-Review buildings, the Pavilion in Riverfront Park, and numerous businesses in between.

Traffic management cameras are focused on nearly 50 intersections in Spokane County, including the Monroe Street Bridge and Interstate 90, Second and Monroe, Second and Browne, Third and Maple, and Third and Washington. The video feeds, which are not recorded and are intended to make drivers and incident response crews aware of accidents and slowdowns, can be viewed online at www.srtmc.org.

The mere presence of a camera can be a crime deterrent, said Marla Nunberg, vice president of the Downtown Spokane Partnership, a member-supported nonprofit with a goal of revitalizing the downtown area.

In the downtown core, "because the cameras are all used in private businesses or on private property it's not an invasion of privacy," Nunberg said.

While some people feel more secure knowing a camera may snap a picture of someone stealing their car, others believe all the monitoring is an incursion.

The Cato Institute, a nonprofit, libertarian research foundation, says it's an invasion to capture a person on camera multiple times a day without his or her knowledge.

Those videos could be misused or not properly interpreted, a Cato Institute article says. A video of a man changing his shirt in New York's Times Square was broadcast nationally and went viral online because officials thought he could have been connected to a car bomb plot in May. He wasn't.

"When it comes to deterring crime and terrorism, police on the beat are still the sharpest tool we have," the article states.

Images of suspects in convenience stores or from ATMs have led to many arrests, authorities say. Earlier this year, surveillance footage helped police identify and arrest a suspect in the slaying of Douglas J. Klages, whose body was found in a cave in the Dishman Hills Natural Area.

"Surveillance has been adopted in banks, and that change has resulted in many arrests in those instances," Harrill said.

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