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Surveillance Cameras Monitor Comings and Goings in Roslyn

By SUSAN KONIG

DRIVE by the ranch-style homes that dot the sleepy streets of the Roslyn Country Club section of Roslyn Heights, and you may get the feeling you're being watched.

Well, you are.

Residents of the 712-home community, so named because it encircles the secluded Roslyn Country Club, say that incidents of crime in their neighborhood have fallen from 33 a year to just 3 or 4, simply because now, they are watching.

Large blue and white signs posted throughout the community let passers-by know that they are under surveillance, not only by marked and unmarked security vehicles but by hidden video cameras. The location of each of the 26 cameras is known only by the family on whose property it is mounted. Not even security guards know their locations.

The project was begun by the Roslyn Country Club Civic Association in 1991. The association's patrol commissioner, Ron Steiger, said it had helped to stop crimes while they were being committed, prevent vandalism and teen-age drinking and has virtually eliminated unauthorized solicitors.

Perpetrators of five of the six crimes over the last two years have been caught on tape and prosecuted.

With a budget of more than \$200,000 this year, the association believes theirs is the nation's first, privately financed patrol, and the only one supplemented by hidden video surveillance cameras. The cost to the homeowner is less than \$400 annually, and subscribers are paid through 1996.

The genesis of this high-tech and, thus far, highly successful project was almost accidental.

Concerns about crime in the area, which borders the Northern State Parkway, began mounting seven years ago, Mr. Steiger said, after several local women were followed home from area shopping centers and robbed at knife or gunpoint. "Since then, I think a lot of shopping centers have had security cameras installed in their lots to help prevent this kind of thing," he said. "But, back then, it seemed almost rampant. We were very worried."

With advice from the Nassau County Police Department, residents formed a voluntary neighborhood patrol. "We took turns driving through the neighborhood to see if anything looked suspicious or out of the ordinary," he said. That was soon replaced by a paid, professional patrol service -- East Gate

Security Consultants in Floral Park -- because "neighbors just weren't doing the patrol themselves," said Mr. Steiger, who is married and has children ages 9 and 11. "Now, at any given time, three guards may be patrolling in marked and unmarked vehicles."

Residents chose the Floral Park company, he said, because it conducted background checks on all of its patrolmen before doing so became a state law in 1994.

News of the patrol spread quickly, Mr. Steiger said, and, within two months, a government agency approached him about a pilot videotape program. Though he signed a document forbidding him to reveal the agency's name, he said it planned to supplement the patrol with thousands of dollars worth of hidden video cameras, which it would pay for and monitor.

"Before we could start, we needed county approval to post signs announcing the cameras," he said. "They were pivotal to the project because they, like the patrolmen, would be a visual deterrent. But, by the time we got approval, the agency had moved onto another community in a different part of the country."

But the signs, which Mr. Steiger had ordered, remained. "We thought, 'This still seems like a good idea,' " he said. "Why don't we try it ourselves? Why not see if it works."

The first step was developing a budget. "We asked the association members how much money they'd be willing to spend on this," Mr. Steiger said. "Fifty cents a day? A dollar a day? Finally, we agreed on about 75 cents per day, which made the annual subscription fee, at that time, \$280." Residents have since agreed to a higher fee for more protection.

Eighty-seven percent of residents pay the full amount, he added, while the rest pay what they can afford.

The price does not allow for full-time patrols. But the number and hours of guards, as well as whether or not they are armed, are subject to change. No one, including residents, know the particulars.

To remain affordable, the cameras are not monitored by security. But they can be monitored by the residents who add a simple cable line and VCR-like machine to their television sets (those who have cameras on their property are given the equipment for free). "If you hear a strange noise at 2 A.M.," Mr. Steiger said, "rather than running outside, you can flip on the TV and see what's going on. You can get up to four different views at once."

Videotapes are rotated every 12 to 15 days and can be scanned through in about 22 minutes, he said. Should a crime occur, the tapes are immediately retrieved, studied and used to apprehend perpetrators, mainly through license plate numbers.

"The way it works," Alfonse Riccardi, a security inspector with East Gate, said, "is we'll get a call from a resident who may see a suspicious vehicle and wants a guard to go over and get the plate number. We'll then notify the police."

"Sometimes, it turns out to be nothing," he said. But, if occupants are not there for a legitimate reason, they are asked to leave the community, via security escort. If they refuse, they are arrested, he said,

and the civic association will prosecute.

Mr. Steiger recalled an incident where a neighbor saw someone breaking car windows on his TV monitor. "He called the patrol, which tracked four teen-agers in a car until the police arrived," he said. "With the proof right on videotape, the vandals were prosecuted."

Recalling other incidents was difficult. "Four or five years ago, there were many," Mr. Steiger said. "Now, I think the word's gotten out that we do this, and people don't bother coming around here anymore.

"The last incident we had," he recounted, "involved some individuals who parked on the Northern State Parkway, hopped the fence and checked to see if any back doors on the bordering street were unlocked. Nothing happened that day, but, what these people didn't know is that we have cameras which face the parkway from behind people's homes."

A week later, he said, a residence was robbed. The surveillance tape caught the suspicious vehicle on the parkway, which led police to the perpetrators. "Not only were they caught for this," he said, "but, when the police went to arrest them, they found stolen merchandise linking them to several other crimes in different neighborhoods."

Cameras, he said, are strategically placed to photograph community entrances, exits and street corners, and record license plate numbers. Most cameras, which range in price from \$395 to \$2,200, have day/night lenses with time-lapse video recorders. They are purchased from different companies, so that no one company knows all of the locations, and they are never focused on private homes, he said, only on areas of public access.

And while no one but the host family can see the camera (legal documents forbid them to reveal that there is a camera on their property), Mr. Steiger says that anyone else would be hard-pressed to detect them. Only a suitcase full of "dummy" cameras kept at his house suggest what they might look like: a smoke detector that opens up to reveal a camera chip smaller than a postage stamp; an indoor/outdoor telephone jack that houses another tiny camera. "This is the latest in technology, and it's really amazing," he said, adding that, after seeing the dummy cameras, some residents have purchased equipment of their own.

"In the beginning, some people objected to the cameras, because they felt they were going to be watched," Mr. Steiger said. "They thought it was kind of Big Brother-ish. Until they started understanding that we weren't watching them, we were watching out for them. We're not interested if someone is having an affair with someone else. We're watching out for the bad guys. We're also catching them, throwing them out and keeping them out."

He notes that none of the cameras are pointed at anyone's house, but rather at street corners and other public areas where crimes and unwanted visitors can be detected. "We went about this very carefully," he said. "We spoke with lawyers and the A.C.L.U. We were very careful not to infringe on anyone's rights or privacy."

Other features of this project include vacant premise checks by security guards, as well as privately financed school programs that make children more aware of crime.

Mr. Steiger believes most association members are pleased with the outcome, because they continue to pay the subscription fee.

"I'm very happy, and so are my neighbors," said Melinda Ball, a five-year resident who has school-aged children. "I think it's been great for the community. And it isn't encroaching. You don't feel watched, you feel protected. When you see the security guards drive by, you feel safe."

Joan and Marvin Lord, 30-year residents, agree. "I don't know the statistics," Mrs. Lord said, "but the crime rate has definitely gone down, and we feel safer now. We don't know where the cameras are, or when the patrols are. But we know that they're there. It's peace of mind. And it's nice to see that civic-mindedness is still alive and well. "

Mr. Steiger said the purchase of additional cameras was being considered.

As the project garners increasing publicity, he says that nearly two dozen communities have called him to find out about it. "We really didn't want publicity; in fact, we were leery of it," he said. "But now, we figure, if we can help other people, why not talk about it. We just won't give the particulars of our setup.

Photo: Surveillance cameras are on duty, sometimes perched on private homes, in the Country Club section of Roslyn. (Rebecca Cooney for The New York Times)