Traffic Safety

Roll the Cameras

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Mayor
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Cameras are not new to Fort Lee, New Jersey. This community was home to the Movie Industry in the 1920s before it moved to Hollywood. Today, cameras have appeared in many public places to do an entirely new job – to help the borough police move traffic and improve safety.
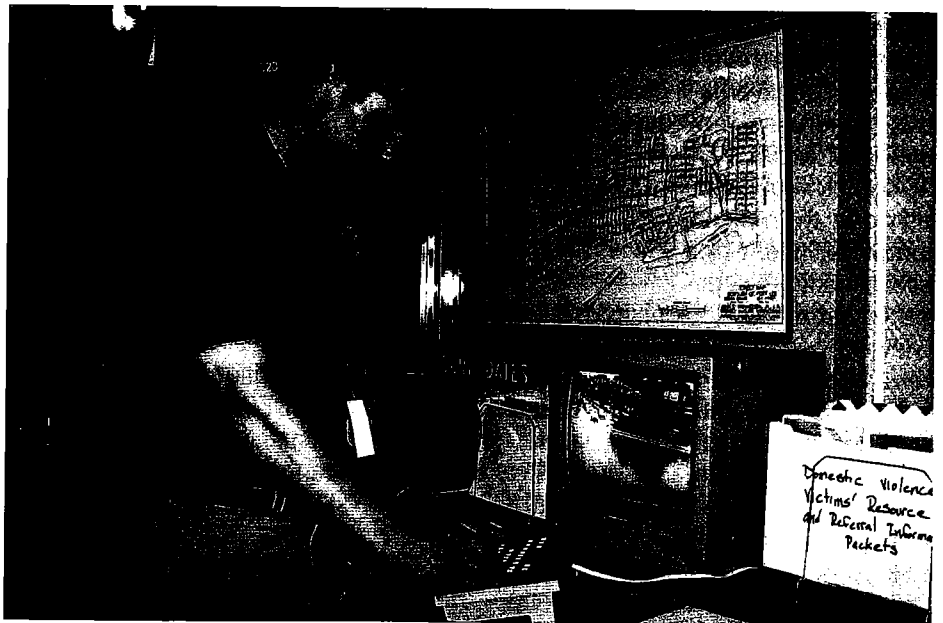
A recent planner, who helped prepare our Master Plan, noted that the borough accommodates larger traffic volumes than any other community its size in New Jersey, probably in the U.S.A. and possibly the world. The George Washington Bridge is the world's busiest bridge. On an average day, it carries approximately 300,000 cars. We share responsibility for bridge traffic with the City of New York.

Like all communities in New Jersey, we bear the major share of responsibility to keep traffic moving and also to maintain the safety of those who drive through our community. Obviously, the overwhelming majority of people coming through the Borough of Fort Lee are not residents. We also need to keep our intersections open for emergency vehicles, not only for our residents but also for those drivers who are on our local roadways. It's not an easy job to sort out the responsibilities of police, who must not only supervise the ocean of vehicles that move through our municipality each day, but also to see that our local streets and intersections are kept clear so that children can get to and from school, people can get out of their driveways and to their businesses, to shop and maintain local commerce.

During the past few weeks, our police have gotten help. A total of twelve sur-

Members of the news media interview Fort Lee Police Chief Thomas Tessaro (center).

A company representative checks the equipment.

veillance cameras, which had been installed, were made operational. They are located at the key intersections throughout the Borough of Fort Lee.

These cameras feed real time monitoring to the Fort Lee Police Headquarters Desk. We also have monitors working at the Dispatching Center of our Communications Department, the Traffic Division, the Chief of Police's Office and the Borough Administrator's Office. This represents a tremendous

grammed to eliminate certain types of viewing. While each camera can turn 360 degrees, our police have created a digital record to eliminate residences. As these cameras turn, residences will show up as black rather than give a picture.

Obviously, there is great flexibility in what a municipality chooses to do in creating a camera record. One of the options not taken by this government was to use an experimental system,

Center now have another information resource so that dispatchers can see what is occurring behind emergency calls.

Many major government agencies have installed cameras. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey has their own network. Their Administration Building, located in the borough, can pull images from Long Island to Saddle Brook. It is our hope that we would be able to coordinate our network with theirs, so that we might better anticipate the "larger picture" as it relates to the traffic in our community.

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information expansion. It allows for dispatching of police resources to better manage the borough's traffic responsibilities. It will also show accidents and fires. The Fort Lee Police tell me that the system will also help fight crime.

Certainly, those of us in government must also deal with the issue of privacy. The privacy issue is very much under the control of the municipality. The cameras can and are prepro-

which can pick out people in crowds, who might be "wanted." This is an issue that might have to be dealt with in communities in the future, should the pressure for anti-terrorism increase.

The Communications Center of the Borough of Fort Lee is always a very active place. The borough was the first municipality in Bergen County to create its own 911 Communication Center. The monitors at the Communication

I am sure that our experience with this new resource can and will be quantified one day to show the improvement in the public safety on the streets and our highways. Other communities in New Jersey, should they choose to put in their own network, will also benefit in many ways.

This equipment is not cheap. The fiber optic network necessary to connect the camera and its monitors, with ancillary expenses, came to a total cost of over $600,000. We would have paid it alone if we had to — but we were able to do it without hitting our taxpayers. A part of our costs came from a State Security Grant, with the bulk being paid by confiscated drug funds.

We are a potential target for terrorism, due to the location of the George Washington Bridge. The cameras are digital and records are maintained for 60 days. These camera records are already paying dividends to determine causes of accidents. Ironically, the first accident that we were able to view involved two of our own emergency vehicles. An ambulance on its way to a call collided with a police cruiser. Not surprisingly, each driver had a different story of that event. By going back and running the camera records, we were able to establish who was right and who was wrong. This would have been impossible without that record. I am sure my colleagues at the League realize what these cameras can do to give them better supervision and more truth in reporting.

Nevertheless, just like many other communities in the state, we have to keep everything moving safely and as swiftly as we can. Why not see if this type of system can improve the lives of your residents? ▲