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Cameras to Keep Watch in Hollywood

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In a new step for crime fighting in Los Angeles, the Police Department plans to start installing surveillance cameras on city streets, beginning with Hollywood Boulevard.

Five video cameras will train their electronic eyes on one of the world's most famous — and infamous — streets as early as January. And if all goes according to plan, there eventually will be 64 cameras on Hollywood, Santa Monica and Sunset boulevards and Western Avenue.

The Hollywood-area cameras are the beginning what some city officials hope will be a wave of virtual law enforcement that will help the understaffed LAPD investigate and deter crime from the San Fernando Valley to South Los Angeles.

Although the City Council and the Police Department have not yet devised a comprehensive approach, at least two council members have found money to begin installing cameras in their districts.

On Wednesday, Councilman Eric Garcetti introduced a motion calling on the city to accept a donation to pay for the Hollywood cameras.

The city is embarking on the effort with little public debate over which streets and neighborhoods warrant cameras, how the LAPD will find the personnel to watch the cameras, and how the city will ensure that the sophisticated devices are not used to peer into the homes of residents.

Los Angeles already has some cameras observing public places, including MacArthur Park and selected graffiti hot spots, but these would be the first police-monitored cameras on city streets.

Even so, Los Angeles would not be at the forefront of video surveillance. Other major cities, including Chicago, have many more cameras.

Aiming cameras at streets to deter drug dealing, car theft and graffiti is a natural step for Los Angeles, said LAPD Capt. Michael Downing, who worked with the Hollywood Entertainment District, which is buying the cameras for that area.

"The philosophy of the camera is the prevention of crime," Downing said. Over time, he said, their presence will "raise the ethical stature of the area."

Earlier this year, police began monitoring seven cameras around MacArthur Park in the city's Westlake district, watching in amazement as crime plummeted, gangs, drug dealers and pimps disappeared, and families with children began returning to the 40-acre expanse in one of the city's poorest areas.

Downing, who spoke from Warsaw, where he is advising Polish police on human rights, stressed that the LAPD would never use the cameras "in any place where there is an expectation of privacy."

"We wouldn't look inside an apartment window or a backyard," he said.

Although city officials and privacy advocates have objected in the past to police proposals to use cameras, Downing said he believes "people are ready to feel more secure in their communities. I think they are willing to give up a little bit ... for more security."

Civil liberties advocates are not so sure.

"This is creeping Big Brotherism, and it's really disturbing," said Ramona Ripston, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California. "More and more, we are losing our right to any kind of privacy."

Ripston drew a sharp distinction between the cameras in MacArthur Park and those that may be mounted at intersections.

"This was a park that families couldn't use because of the pimps, the drug dealers," she said. "In that particular situation, we felt maybe the public safety issue did win out."

On public streets, she said, "the Police Department shouldn't be able to monitor everybody's comings and goings."

Across the country and around the world, cameras are becoming an ever more prevalent tool of law enforcement.

New Orleans and Chicago recently installed cameras, as have Palm Springs and Washington, D.C. Across the Atlantic, England has embraced the concept, with more than 150,000 cameras throughout London.

Here in the world's movie and television capital, cameras have been in use for years by private agencies and community groups.

In the 1990s, landlords mounted cameras on buildings along Yucca Street in Hollywood, turning over footage of suspected drug activity to police. Police then sent letters to some vehicle owners, warning that their cars had been seen in a zone known for heavy narcotics trafficking.

That raised concerns from civil libertarians but drew raves from the community.

Three years ago, the LAPD installed motion-sensing cameras around Hollywood and in the Valley to fight graffiti. Once activated, the cameras broadcast a recorded message warning that photographs are about to be taken.

But those efforts are a far cry from the technology planned for Hollywood Boulevard and other locations.

The cameras, which can pan, tilt and zoom at the flick of joystick controlled by an officer, are capable of seeing every inch of a block. Police will also have the capability of searching recordings kept on file.

The initial batch of five Hollywood Boulevard cameras will cost \$103,000 for the equipment and \$25,000 per year to maintain.

Plans call for installing them along the boulevard at the corners of Vine Street, Cahuenga Boulevard and Whitley, Highland and Sycamore avenues. Accompanying them will be signs warning passersby that they are being filmed, said Kerry Morrison, executive director of the association.

The cameras have found support on the City Council.

"I think it's great," said Councilwoman Jan Perry, who said she recently won funding to install cameras in parks in her South Los Angeles district.

Garcetti has pushed for cameras in his district, which runs from Hollywood east to Echo Park and north to Glassell Park. He recently obtained a \$180,000 grant to install 14 cameras in areas around parks there.

LAPD spokeswoman Mary Grady said the department is studying the experiences of other cities to come up with a model for how best to use cameras in the Los Angeles.

"The criteria is to put them in places where there is a high incidence of crime," said Assistant Chief George Gascon.

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Times staff writers Andrew Blankstein and Richard Winton contributed to this report.

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