

BIG BROTHER

Carolina Beach installs surveillance cameras at park, Boardwalk to enhance public safety. And it's not alone: Cameras are everywhere.

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You're under video surveillance at ATMs, many grocery stores and malls. And soon you'll be on camera at Carolina Beach.

The southern New Hanover County beach town recently installed video cameras at Freeman Park and the Boardwalk to give police officers a bird's eye view of what's happening in those areas.

"We're doing this for public safety reasons," town spokeswoman Valita Quattlebaum said.

Although the cameras went up about two weeks ago, they aren't operational yet because the town is waiting for electrical service to be hooked up. Mrs. Quattlebaum said the connection should be made "any day now."

At Freeman Park, the cameras will allow officers to see if the clerk there is having a problem with someone who won't pay or is being harassed by a disorderly visitor. The Boardwalk camera also will alert officers if someone is out of control or sick and needs assistance.

Since the town stepped up police patrols at Freeman Park in March, officers have handed out 83 civil citations, ranging from driving on the dunes to having glass containers on the beach. Three people also have been cited for burning the fence that protects the dunes.

Along the Boardwalk, town officials say the most common offenses involve people being drunk or disruptive. Precise numbers for the past six months weren't immediately available, but officials said the number of incidents doubles in the summertime.

The cameras cost about \$3,000 each, including installation. Law enforcement officials will be able to view the areas on computer screens at the Carolina Beach Police Department. Mrs. Quattlebaum said the system would allow the town to archive recordings indefinitely, but town officials haven't yet decided how long they want to keep the images.

The town also plans to install laptops in police cars by the end of the year, and eventually a few officers will even be able to see the images on their cell phones. That will allow them to respond quickly if they see something happening, Mrs. Quattlebaum said.

The cameras use wireless technology – a service available throughout the town since



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Jonathan Wrenn, with Approach Communications, removes a video surveillance camera at the entrance to Freeman Park at Carolina Beach on June 17. He was replacing the camera with a newer one. The cameras are being installed, the town says, to deter crime and make residents feel more secure.

Staff photo | Ken Blevins

December. Wireless fidelity, commonly called Wi-Fi, allows Internet access without cords and uses radio signals instead of cables to plug into cyberspace.

“The security cameras will enhance our public safety response capability,” Town Manager Calvin Peck said. “And this new technology gives us one more tool to use in protecting our citizens and visitors.”

Mrs. Quattlebaum noted that only law enforcement officials have access to the system, which requires a password to access and has an encrypted signal.

“This is not the Carolina Beach reality show,” she said.

The idea of using surveillance cameras to deter crime and capture criminals in the act is nothing new locally.

And the abundance of surveillance cameras in public places has raised a few eyebrows, especially among civil libertarians and privacy advocates.

“America is fast becoming a surveillance society where every|thing we do outside of our house is subject to being watched,” said Jennifer Rudinger, executive director for the North Carolina chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

She said she sees room for invasion of privacy and misuse at the beach, where someone could use the camera to zoom in on women’s body parts, especially when they’re wearing bathing suits.

“It’s unfortunate to see the proliferation of these spy cams when there’s no evidence to suggest that the violation of our privacy is justified,” she said.

For instance, United Kingdom governments have installed more than 1.5 million cameras in the past decade in response to terrorist bombings. Although it’s estimated that the average Londoner is captured on tape more than 300 times a day, not a single bomber has been caught.

Locally, several school systems have long used cameras to keep an eye on students in areas such as hallways and stairwells. The New Hanover County school system also has cameras in some school buses.

New Hanover Regional Medical Center also has found success with a video surveillance system, using it to ensure safety and protect against liability.

In addition, the Wilmington Housing Authority provides surveillance in Solomon Towers. Although there’s a part-time security guard, residents can view what the camera shows on their television sets.

The housing authority used to have cameras at Creekwood but it stopped using them a couple of years ago because grant money ran out, said Marilyn Edge, director of planning grants and special projects for the housing authority. Those cameras also were vandalized a lot, and the authority didn’t have anyone to monitor the stream 24 hours a day, she said. Despite the prevalence of surveillance cameras used for security, live Web cams have become quite popular for other reasons.

For example, UNCW has three cameras showing different aspects of campus life, including the campus commons and construction of the cultural arts building. The views can be seen online at www.uncw.edu/itsd/cam. Local television stations also have cameras trained on busy roadways to provide traffic information. You can even check out the surfing conditions at Wrightsville Beach via a live Web cam at www.wblivesurf.com.

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