

LPR cameras may be coming soon to Clark Bridge

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - LPR, or license plate reader, cameras may be placed on the Clark Bridge in the coming months, and Alton Police Chief Jason Simmons believes they will only add to the safety of the Riverbend area.

Officers from the Alton Police Department presented an informative proposal regarding the cameras Wednesday evening at the Godfrey Village Council meeting. The idea was first proposed by the Alton Police Department in 2015, but Simmons said the department and city did not have the available budget to install them. With recent

carjackings in Godfrey, however, the idea of cameras has gotten more support with Godfrey Mayor Mike McCormick joining with Alton Mayor Brant Walker in calling for this technology.

When installed, these cameras would read the license plates of every car traveling across the Clark Bridge from both Illinois and Missouri. If a car is wanted by any agency, an alert will be sent to the Alton Police Department, Madison County Sheriff's Office and Illinois State Police. Simmons said the technology will specifically be used to target vehicles traveling in and out of Alton, which are either stolen or are marked with warrants. Under no circumstances, he reiterated several times, would they be utilized for traffic citations.

"We are not going to use these to write tickets," Simmons said. "It does not notify us regarding traffic notifications. It only notifies us based on license plates. I don't have the time or resources to have an officer sitting there watching the live stream and targeting every person speeding or running stop signs and red lights."

Simmons is also aware of some of the choice adjectives people may give the implementation of these cameras, including "Orwellian."

"If you're not doing anything criminal, you have nothing to worry about," Simmons said. "It is in use in larger cities such as Atlanta and Chicago, because they have a criminal element coming from outside the city to do criminal activities inside the city. People in the city I think will welcome this, because they want to feel safer in our communities."

Many crimes could have been solved earlier if this technology was utilized, Simmons said, including a murder, which took place when people in a car traveling from Alton shot a man and kicked the body out of the car on the other side of the bridge.

Lesser crimes such as retail theft could also be solved easier with this technology, Simmons said. Many establishments such as Home Depot, Lowes, Wal-Mart and the Alton Square Mall suffer losses from St. Louis residents coming across the bridge and departing back to North County. Simmons said police usually receive a vehicle description as well as a partial license plate number.

Another positive, he said, was putting a dent in the heroin epidemic. He said many heroin dealers travel from North St. Louis County to deliver drugs to Alton and other Riverbend communities. If these cameras were in place, he said it would be easier for police to apprehend these dealers.

"We can make a real dent in the heroin problem," Simmons said. "Safety is important, and monitoring the criminal that comes over is part of that. We want them to know if

you come over to our city, you're going to get caught. We all have to work together to make things better in our community. I don't know why people would want to keep this tool out of our hands. These are not traffic cameras to write citations. We're not doing all that. It is an intelligence-gathering system allowing us to prevent and prosecute crimes."

When asked if the system could be hacked, Simmons said it is in use nationwide, and hacking is a "very, very low probability."

When asked if it could be abused, Simmons said he had no idea how or why the system could be abused.

Cameras may be mounted on the Clark Bridge within two months, Simmons said. They should be visible on poles and signage.

Simmons also said criminals would not take a roundabout way to the area through a different bridge and Illinois Route 3.

"If you live in North St. Louis by Halls Ferry or somewhere like that, you're not going to drive around through several municipalities and take Route Three," he said. "They will come across the Clark Bridge like they always do."

He said he would not be surprised to see this technology come to other bridges in the area either.

Currently, the department is going through a contractor called Vigilant to have the cameras installed. It has the backing of the Alton Police Department, Madison County Sheriff's Office, Walker, McCormick and Madison County State's Attorney Tom Gibbons, but Simmons said he would also appreciate public support for the initiative.

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