

# Alton Police Department hosts public meeting regarding license plate reading cameras

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer  
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ALTON - The Alton Police Department held a public hearing regarding license plate reading (LPR) cameras on the Clark Bridge Saturday morning in front of a small group of people.

Alton Police Chief Jason Simmons was joined by Lt. Cranmer and Deputy Chief Terry Buhs as well as Dynamic Controls representative Jeff Bird to explain the proposed cameras, which would read the plates of every car passing across the bridge to look for stolen cars, people with warrants and possible drug traffickers.

First and foremost, Cranmer said the cameras were never to be used for traffic crimes. Simmons added Madison County State's Attorney Tom Gibbons would never prosecute red light camera tickets in the county. Bird added the software cannot be converted to red light cameras nor can it read the tags on vehicles to see if they are expired.

Bird also said the data is secure and enclosed, meaning it could not go to any third party system. He also said after market plate coverings would not thwart the machine.

"If you work hard enough, anything can be defeated," Bird said.

Simmons said there will be four cameras instead of the original six proposed, which Bird said would monitor all lanes going to and from Alton.

After being asked who would have access to the cameras, Cranmer said it would be available via the Internet to all local, state and federal law enforcement agencies.

A Godfrey man who said he was 100 percent in favor of it asked about the monitoring of the cameras by both Illinois and Missouri authorities.

Simmons and Cranmer said they were both familiar with St. Louis's camera system. Simmons said St. Louis authorities were able to use a vehicle description and partial plate number to apprehend a serial robber from Washington Park.

Cranmer also said the cameras visually capture an image of the vehicle when a plate has been tagged.

"This is really a game changer for us and our ability to solve violent crimes," Simmons said. "The heroin epidemic here is awful, same with across the country."

Besides violent crimes, felony retail theft, and the heroin epidemic, Simmons said it could also be used to stop an influx of crime from North County.

Cranmer said the cameras would cost around \$110,000 originally, but recent bids have dropped the price to \$40,000 a year, which would be split between the Alton Police Department, Madison County State's Attorney's Office and the Village of Godfrey. Alton's portion came from money seized through drug enforcement.

Annual maintenance of the camera systems would require a mere \$150 a year for wireless service, which is much cheaper than video storage from proposed body cameras many people touted instead of these LPR cameras.

"This is not Big Brother watching you, like I've seen on social media threads," Simmons said. "This is a tool to keep our community safer."

Data from the cameras would be stored at the St. Louis Municipal Police Department on a server Simmons described as secure as Fort Knox. He said his department toured the facility as well and was impressed with its capabilities. Cranmer also assured stored data would expire in a short amount of time, but did not comment on that exact length.

Access to that data would be given to local law enforcement for use via the internet using passwords.

One woman at the meeting asked if plate-switching would trick the cameras. Cranmer replied such abuses would be an inevitability, but Simmons said currently no system was in place, so at least the cameras would be something. Bird added the system would also take clear pictures of both the vehicle and the plates.

Simmons said a similar camera system was used to locate a missing Madison County girl who was taken by her stepfather into West Virginia. Similar cameras linked to the same system were used on bridge there to locate the suspected car. Because of that, the young woman was safely returned.

Currently, the system is awaiting final approval from IDOT, so no final decisions have been made. Simmons said his administration would seek transparency through every step of the process.

Once approved, the measure would take as long as six weeks to implement. Cranmer said he hoped it would be in use by Christmas.