

Alton Police Chief hopes to have LPR cameras installed on the bridge by Christmas

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - License-plate-reading (LPR) cameras will be installed on the Clark Bridge soon, and Alton Police Chief Jason "Jake" Simmons hopes they will be ready by Christmas.

The cameras, which have stirred much social media controversy since they were announced earlier this year, will be equipped to read every license plate of each vehicle crossing both from Missouri into Illinois and Illinois into Missouri. Any plates registered as stolen or attached to a warrant will send an alert to several area police departments, including both Alton and the Madison County Sheriff's Office.

Footing the bill for these cameras - a sum of just over \$38,000 - is being split three ways by the Madison County State's Attorney's Office, the Village of Godfrey and the Alton Police Department, which is taking its portion from asset forfeitures claimed from drug enforcement.

Simmons said the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) approved the placement of the two cameras on the bridge, adding the cameras themselves have arrived and are in boxes in St. Louis. He said he is hoping they can be installed before the upcoming Christmas rush. Simmons said the City of Alton will approve a resolution at this evening's council meeting to validate an agreement with IDOT for the department accepting liability for damages on the cameras, among other issues.

Many detractors of these cameras have cited concerns over both privacy and potential abuse from law enforcement coming in the wake of these cameras' installation. Simmons said he understands the concerns, and has been doing everything in his power to alleviate them - especially concerns the cameras may be used for traffic enforcement and the data collected being sold to third parties.

"I have done my best to try to convince people that it cannot be used for traffic," Simmons said Wednesday morning (for the umpteenth time). "This is a way for us to connect with the community. This is about collecting intel. This is not a red light system, and this cannot be converted into a red light system. The cameras are too far from traffic lights to even consider that usage. They also cannot be used for speed control. There is no mechanical device on these cameras to gauge speed. I've tried everything to tell people this. I've been on record several times saying it cannot be used for that."

It should be noted Madison County States Attorney Tom Gibbons has previously stated his office would not prosecute any tickets issued by red light camera systems.

Data collected from the cameras will be stored at a secure data center in St. Louis, the location of which could not be disclosed by Simmons. He also said data would only be stored for a finite amount of time, but said he could not comment regarding how long of a time that may be. He also said data cannot be sold to third parties.

"Data will not be sold to third parties," he said. "That is one of the reasons we went with this company."

Former company bidding for the cameras, Vigilant, lost the contract to St. Louis-based Dynamic Controls and Gentec Cameras, which does not sell its data to third parties.

The system being utilized by Alton would be shared with every police department in the area, Simmons said. He said mayors and police chiefs from across the Riverbend area met in the office of Alton Mayor Brant Walker two weeks ago, each signing a letter to IDOT endorsing the system. Simmons said his department would train other departments in the usage of the system, which can be accessed online using a password-protected login.

Potential criminals taking alternate routes was also addressed by Simmons. Many detractors of the cameras say criminals will take Route 3 from St. Louis into Granite City and up into the Riverbend. Simmons admits that could be the case, but added a majority of criminals coming into Alton from Missouri utilize the Clark Bridge from North County, which is the fastest approach. That route also has the fewest municipalities to cross.

"A good number of statistics shows a large portion of our violent criminals come from across the river," Simmons said. "Bad guys are coming from North St. Louis into our communities and committing violent crimes. We also have people coming across that bridge to sell heroin and cocaine. We have several confidential informants and people who have been arrested talk and tell us that they are using that bridge to bring those dangerous drugs into our community."

When asked for examples of how the cameras could help the area, Simmons did not have to recall much farther back in time than earlier this week when alleged thieves came into Alton from St. Louis in a vehicle stolen from St. Charles County. Simmons said those people broke into a liquor cabinet in the Walgreen's in Upper Alton before being caught on Broadway, before they could reach Landmarks Boulevard.

He also used an example of an Illinois resident posing a danger to St. Louis residents. Recently a Jerseyville man was arrested for manufacturing LSD-laced candy to sell in St. Louis. Simmons said, armed with that knowledge, the cameras could warn St. Louis and St. Charles authorities about possible drug dealers entering their areas.

"We could send them an alert and say, 'hey, this knucklehead is crossing the bridge and may be heading toward you.'"

Assuming everything goes as planned, Simmons said he is optimistic the system can be in place by Christmas, but said he was realistically unsure about that timing as of now.