

# Candid cameras in Williamsport

A few weeks ago, Williamsport was crowned the second safest city in Pennsylvania, but Mayor Gabe Campana wants the city to be number one. Working with Congressman Chris Carney (D-Dimock), the city administration has applied for a \$450,000 surveillance camera grant entitled "COPS Technology Program". City Council's Public Safety Committee said in a written statement, "The use of the grant will be for acquiring the infrastructure needed to support a security camera system." The exact locations of the six-camera system have not been publicly announced but it is generally believed that "high crime" areas within the city will be targeted.

"High crime areas" is code words for low-income sections of the city. Don't get me wrong; I'm all for public safety but not at the expense of privacy violations of the poor, many of whom are African-American. I've been told that the cameras would be used in places like Flanagan Park or the downtown business district. Yet, I have an uneasy feeling about the possibility of using surveillance cameras on neighborhood streets. In its report, *Under the Watchful Eye*, the ACLU of California noted, "Studies published in Great Britain have shown discriminatory use of surveillance cameras. Among other issues, researchers found that 'the young, the male, and the black were systematically and disproportionately targeted, not because of their involvement in crime or disorder, but for no obvious reason.'"

Encouraging increased public vigilance and greater participation in the various town watch programs in the city would be a better use of the money. Thirty years ago, I participated in a town watch program in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Northwest Philadelphia. We patrolled the streets and alleys on foot in the late evenings. We wore bright orange jackets, carried CB radios and heavy-duty flashlights. We wanted a visible presence in the community. We shared information with the police precinct. We alerted the police when we spotted any suspicious activity. Our calls to the dispatcher got special attention that resulted in faster response times.

Things are different today. "Let the cops take care of it. That's what they get paid for!" we tell ourselves. But good citizenship is more than paying taxes and voting on Election Day, it is also watching out for our neighbors. The "us vs. them" concept does not



Richard  
James

apply. We are in this together.

How can we keep our streets safe with minimal personal risk and keep costs low? I have an idea. Let's start a Volunteer Citizens' Photographic Taskforce. If you see a crime being committed, take a picture of it with your cell phone then send it to a special website that is monitored by the Police Department! The image that is received would have pertinent information encoded in it such as a time and date stamp and location of the incident. At Police Headquarters, the image is treated like a 911 call. It is forwarded to the proper jurisdiction and routed to the police officer assigned to the call.

Example: Two suspects are engaged in an illegal drug sale on a public street corner. An alert passerby photographs them. The photo is sent to a police officer to investigate. The image transmission can happen within a matter of seconds using current technology. Within minutes, an arrest is made based on the photographic evidence. Voila! Bad guys caught!

But be careful. The extensive use of cameras as tools against crime can have unintended and unforeseen consequences. We could easily become a community of electronic snitches. All of us are vulnerable to paparazzi-like surveillance abuse. Even government officials could come under electronic scrutiny. Average citizens might shadow police cruisers or spy on politicians. Do we want to be a nation of spies, ratting each other out to Big Brother? Do we want zealous amateur crime fighters recording our every move? Do we need another Michael Moore or James O'Keefe playing "gotcha' journalism"?

Surveillance cameras have little deterrence value. They might increase arrest quotas and improve conviction rates but are they worth the price of lost anonymity? Even in an open society, a modicum of secrecy and personal privacy is necessary. On second thought, maybe my idea ain't so great. Let's call the whole thing off.

---

*James is the publisher of the online newsletter, An African-American Perspective. [www.rcjamesdesign.net/African-American](http://www.rcjamesdesign.net/African-American)*

---