



Eagle Eyes on the Border

C rime prevention has a new set of eyes to help guard the U.S.-Mexico border. The Eagle Pass Police Department is using a sophisticated new camera system to monitor an area of Texas' Rio Grande notorious for illegal border crossings and drug smugglings. In its first 6 months of operation, the camera system known as the Eagle Eyes Project has proven itself: Practically no one uses the crossing any more. The success of Eagle Eyes can be discussed as much in terms of crimes prevented as in mass arrests made.

Although it has been quiet under the Camino Real International Bridge, that was not always the case. As Police Chief Juan Antonio Castaneda explains, before the cameras, officers on routine patrol often encountered groups of 40, 50, or even 60 illegal immigrants heading for the downtown area from the river crossing. Since the cameras have been installed, the illegal crossings have dwindled to almost none, a big change from the days when the U.S. Border Patrol caught more than 15,000 migrants from Central America and Brazil crossing in the Eagle Pass area in an 8-month period ("Non-Mexican illegal entrants swamp Texas border," *Arizona Daily Star*, May 31, 2005). In addition, several individuals have drowned while attempting to cross the river, and Border Patrol agent Jefferson Barr was shot and killed in the heavily trafficked area in 1997.

"Since the installment of the cameras, we have seen a significant drop in immigration and narcotics traffic," Castaneda says. "I think the extensive publicity it received in the local media and in the Mexican media has helped discourage people. The area was used extensively by illegal immigrants because the river is very shallow right there; they can literally walk across. Also, the downtown area is very close, and they would run and mingle with the local crowds and disappear."

According to Castaneda, the cameras also cover a highway heavily used by trucks that runs under the bridge, which connects Eagle Pass with Rio Piedras, Mexico. Hijackings of vehicles by perpetrators coming out of the water had been a concern, but not now.

Eagle Pass obtained the sophisticated surveillance system with the assistance of the Border Research and Technology Center (BRTC), a program of the Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice (NIJ). Castaneda is familiar with NIJ and its programs. He has been a long-term member of BRTC's regional advisory council and served as its chair in 2004 and 2005.

"I have been very outspoken over the years about the lack of technology and personnel to combat immigration and narcotics problems," Castaneda says, adding that Chris Aldridge, director of BRTC-Western Operations, saw him being interviewed on C-SPAN several years ago and asked him to serve on the advisory council. His position on the council eventually led to Eagle Pass becoming the demonstration site for the sophisticated surveillance system, dubbed Eagle Eyes in the city's honor.

The video surveillance system was developed by a team from the University of California-San Diego with funding from the Technical Support Working Group. BRTC had received a request from the Eagle Pass Police Department for assistance in locating this type of technology, and knew that a demonstration site was needed to evaluate the camera system. BRTC introduced the interested parties and helped with obtaining NIJ funding for the cameras installed in Eagle Pass.

The system includes three cameras providing 24/7 coverage, one a stationary unit with a 360-degree view that covers the bridge itself, nearby pedestrian and railroad bridges, local roads, and the riverbank. Two pan-tilt-zoom cameras, one with infrared for night-time vision, can be focused on specific areas at an officer's discretion and help triangulate the location of an incident. If the system itself detects unusual movement, it will immediately flag the video stream. Observers can also zoom in on anything they think appears suspicious, record details such as license plate numbers, and dispatch officers to the scene if the situation appears to require it. In the event of a traffic accident, dispatchers know the extent of damage and injuries and can send appropriate help.

“It is wonderful to see this advanced science and technology assisting the people of Texas,” Aldridge says. “We believe this demonstration project will become a valuable platform that can be adapted by other law enforcement agencies charged with protecting our bridges and borders.”

Castaneda is content to have the project remain successful through deterrence, and to that end he periodically contacts the Mexican media for “reminder” articles to keep the system well publicized.

“The problem is under control in this particular area,” he says, adding that Texas Governor Rick Perry is very big on technology and has talked about placing surveillance cameras at numerous sites along the border. The U.S. Border Patrol also monitors some sites. “I’m very big on this technology aspect. It certainly has worked for us.”

For more information about the Eagle Eyes Project, contact BRTC-Western Operations, brtcwestops@sbcglobal.net or 619-229-2277.



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