

SURVEILLANCE SYSTEMS & MONEY

Financial realities will shape how law enforcement does surveillance

BY ROBERT KEYES

Compton and Vallejo, Calif.—what do they have in common? And: Why is “money” included in the title of this article?

They are cities of similar size; possess diverse populations; have challenging crime problems with gangs, violence and prostitution at the top of the list; and both have city-wide surveillance systems.

Oh yeah—I almost forgot—Compton and Vallejo also have huge financial problems that have made national headlines.

Compton's Efforts

The City of Compton entered into the camera business in 2007 when the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD), who provides policing services to Compton, partnered with the Safe Cities Foundation to install fourteen PTZ (pan, tilt, zoom) cameras in the newly constructed Gateway Town Center and four cameras at the Compton Civic

Center on the roof of the Compton Branch of the Los Angeles County Superior Court. Also, as part of the installation, LASD included six license plate recognition (LPR) cameras using PIPS technology.

This initial system was funded exclusively by the private sector with significant contributions from Target Corporation and Belkin International.

The cameras proved to be successful over time and, as a result, the city recently upgraded the existing system and also installed an additional 20 cameras in nine of the Compton city parks. These cameras are actively monitored in the Compton LASD dispatch center, where three dispatch posi-

tions have viewing stations and a video wall has been added to further enhance the system. One monitor on this video wall is also dedicated to LPR—with audio—so a LPR alert will garner the attention of the dispatchers and the watch deputy, even during busy times.

Although LASD currently monitors 38 PTZ cameras in Compton, they're working with the city to increase the surveillance system by yet another 50 cameras and to also add an additional 22 LPR cameras to be installed at six east-west choke points.

Besides the expansion of the LPR component of the surveillance system, a major focus of this expansion will be near ubiquitous video coverage along Long Beach Blvd., where there's significant criminal activity, particularly prostitution.

The initial video system at Gateway Town Center had a fiber optic infrastructure, but the parks project and the city-wide expansion

weren't so fortunate, so the entire expansion will be built out using wireless technology. Firetide radios were the initial choice for the parks project and Compton will continue using them as they have proven to be very dependable.

The funding for this expansion has been a combination of Community Development Block Grants and local bond monies.

Vallejo's Efforts

Vallejo began their system by installing 20 PTZ cameras at selected locations determined by the police department. Like Compton, Vallejo has a problem with prostitution and gangs and their camera placement was determined with that in

mind. There is a new system and its brief existence has been met with a great deal of community support, to the point that business owners have asked to fund additional cameras with private dollars.

Vallejo will soon be linking an additional 26 cameras, located in a parking garage, to their existing system. These additional cameras are a mix of PTZ and fixed and are a disparate system, but these added cameras will integrate with their system.

So, pleased with what the existing system has done, Vallejo has immediate plans to add an additional 12 cameras.

Vallejo does have fiber infrastructure, but also uses wireless technology and, like Compton, Vallejo also uses Firetide radios.

Similar to Compton, Vallejo's video monitoring is done in the 911 communication center. This can be challenging as dispatchers already have their hands full multitasking the different duties required in a 911 center. Because of this, care has to be taken to provide a well-designed workspace, one which works well with the system.

Dispatchers in Vallejo are able to bring up a camera when an event occurs, and do it in a manner that aids, rather than hinders, their 911 responsibilities. While there can be reluctance to accept additional duties by already overloaded dispatch staff, experience says a well-designed system will be effectively used as time progresses, as staff sees success stories pile up.

The best-case scenario would be to have full-time employees monitor the cameras who don't have other responsibilities. But that can be cost-prohibitive. Some agencies have used light-duty officers, part-time employees and volunteers, and found success. Anyway you look at it, you have to have a well-considered monitoring program.

How Do You Pay for It?

In building a surveillance system like Compton's or Vallejo's, where do you start when it comes to researching what to buy and who to have build it?

When both Compton and Vallejo's systems are complete, costs sum into the millions of dollars, which is pretty hard to come by in these tough economic times.

These systems have been acquired through traditional purchasing mechanisms relying on bid processes that at times leave something to be desired. While both Compton and Vallejo are very happy with the integrator that provided their video solution, as public agencies, we have entered a new era regarding finances.

Because of limited funding, public agencies have to take a new approach or face huge financial difficulties. A quote from Winston Churchill must be the new mantra of police agencies: “We have run out of money, now we have to think.”

Although there have been budget crunches before, nothing approaching our current predicament has occurred during my almost four decades of public safety experience. Things have been tight in the past, but never in recent memory have things been so bad.

To that end, we now have to “think” about ways to save money creatively: most of a police managers' budget is completely out of their control. The majority of a public safety budget is consumed by employee pay and benefits, leaving little left over for camera technology, much less vehicles, equipment and other supplies.

The Fiscal Association

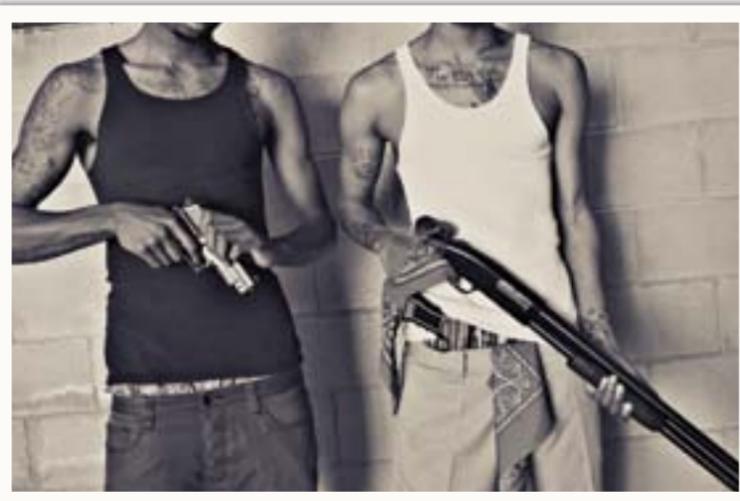
At the direction of LASD Sheriff Lee Baca, a very effective solution toward saving public funds for all types of purchase has been created by two sergeants with LASD. Hard-chargers both, Chris Kovac is a recent graduate of the University of Southern California's Executive Master of Leadership program, and Jennifer Barsh is a recent graduate of the Naval Postgraduate School, receiving a master's degree in Homeland Security. Kovac, coincidentally, was the project manager behind the Compton Safe Cities Foundation surveillance program that is presently being expanded.

Both sergeants are assigned to the purchasing arm of LASD and have the full-time task of saving money acquiring anything the department needs,

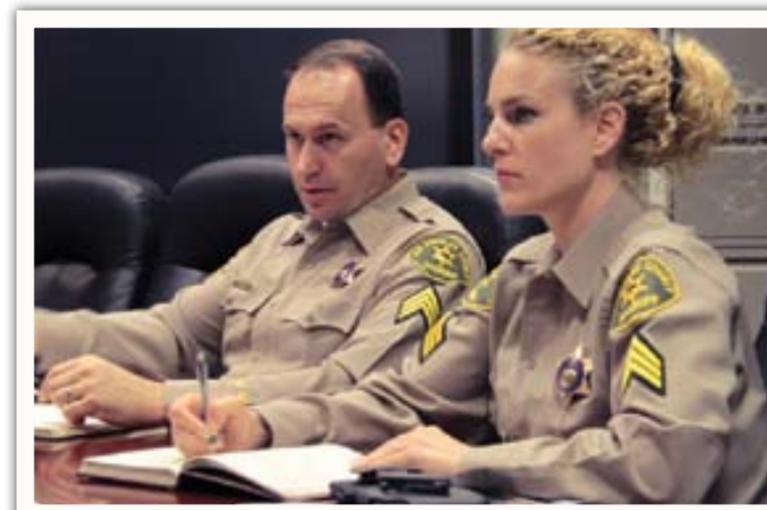
ranging from toilet paper to inmate screening devices to firearms to numerous types of technology.

They soon discovered that different agencies rarely discuss purchases with each other. They also discovered that agencies purchasing identical items routinely paid vastly different prices for exactly the same thing. While one agency might purchase an elaborate technology system of some kind, they often didn't have contextual information from other agencies to determine if their proposed purchase was cost effective.

In discussions with both, I recalled the many times I would be involved in a major purchase and have no real idea of cost. There was no gauge to determine what you should actually pay other than the manufacture quoted MSRP. In your personal life, when buying a house or a car or any other major purchase, you do your homework, investigate →→



For agencies facing significant crime and gang problems, surveillance cameras can be an effective, affordable force multiplier.



Sgts. Chris Kovac and Jennifer Barsh head up The Fiscal Association, a resource for public safety projects with significant fiscal outlays.

and nearly always negotiate an acceptable price.

That too often doesn't happen in a public purchasing environment. The bid process is supposed to provide savings, but sometimes it doesn't. In my experience, it can actually hamstring the process.

Tasked with the goal of maximizing purchasing power to save money, Sheriff Baca directed Kovac and Barsh to think creatively to identify solutions that would allow for information sharing across all types of public agency purchases.

Like the original Compton surveillance project, this new purchasing effort is independent of the LASD and is under the umbrella of the Safe Cities Foundation, a 501(3)(c) organization. This foundation will support a newly deployed "Fiscal Association" that will provide agencies wishing to purchase any type of product or system the ability to acquire specifics about that product, including price, vendor information and experiences both positive and negative regarding acquisitions.

This will be accomplished through a Fiscal Association website that only public agency employees with purchasing responsibility can access. Each prospective member will be vetted to ensure that participants are only representatives from public agencies, so information can be shared in an objective manner. Also, imagine the clout of several agencies combining their purchasing power to negotiate a better price.

Conclusion

My personal experience with vendors and integrators has been very mixed. I've been lied to, had things deliberately misrepresented, and had horrible experiences, which have cost me time, effort and ultimately taxpayer monies. Everyone's heard the horror stories about the major, billion-dollar companies that have promised the moon and delivered a poor product.

However, I've had extremely positive experiences with vendors too. *Case in point:* Leverage Information Systems, which is the integrator for both the Compton and Vallejo surveillance projects. Most agencies aren't aware of a good or bad reputation until it's too late. Wouldn't it be nice to hear about the positive and negative before you made the purchase?

The Fiscal Association will allow people charged with spending public funds to log on to the website and find out information about who's buying what and what their individual experiences are. So, when you want to buy a surveillance system, or any product or service related to a public agency, check out the Fiscal Association at www.fiscalassociation.org. **LOM**

ROBERT KEYES retired from the Clovis Police Department at the rank of captain with nearly 34 years of law enforcement experience. He has served as interim chief of police and also interim director of information services for the city of Clovis. Keyes has also made several presentations on behalf of the IACP and the Department of Homeland Security on the topic of CCTV and wireless. He holds a bachelor's degree from California State University, Fresno. Contact him at keyesfamily1@yahoo.com.



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