



Marin County Civic Center
3501 Civic Center Drive
Suite 329
San Rafael, CA 94903
415 473 7331 T
415 473 3645 F
415 473 6172 TTY
KRice@marincounty.org
www.marincounty.org/bos

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Dear Greenbrae/Kentfield Neighbor,

At our last Greenbrae/Kentfield community meeting in September we focused quite a bit of time on recent residential crime trends, prevention, law enforcement, etc. At the meeting, residents requested that my office explore the use of electronic license plate readers as a potential crime prevention tool for use in the Greenbrae/Kentfield area. We have spoken with representatives from the Sheriff's Office, local law enforcement and done some research as well, and wanted to get back to you with a summary of our findings (see below).

Please know that the information below is not intended to provide a definitive recommendation for/against license plate readers (LPRs), but instead is intended to continue a discussion with the community and our local law enforcement agencies regarding our collective and ongoing efforts to reduce and prevent crime. It's clear from our findings that while license plate readers could potentially be helpful in deterring and solving some types of crime in some areas, the use of LPRs would not be a panacea – rather, they would be one more tool towards potential identification of criminal activity, apprehension of suspect, or recovery of stolen items. Decisions around whether to make an investment in the technology need to be weighed in context of cost and level of effectiveness.

I appreciate your interest and concern in this important community issue. Please let me know if you have any further thoughts or questions (415-473-7331 or krice@marincounty.org). I will continue to work with the community, Sheriff's Office and Central Marin Police Authority (CMPA) to support ongoing efforts to reduce and prevent crime.

Sincerely,

Katie Rice

Electronic License Plate Readers

LPRs scan the license plates of passing cars, instantly checking them against registration violation, warrants and criminal databases, sounding an alert in a respective law enforcement dispatch center when a plate on a stolen or suspect vehicle is spotted. An alert is then broadcast to area police units. These cameras can either be stationary or mounted on police cars or trailers. At this time, the Sheriff’s Office has two mobile cameras, CMPA has one mobile camera, and several other local municipalities use mobile devices as well. In addition, the Town of Tiburon installed stationary cameras at the town’s two entrances in July 2010.

Effectiveness

LPRs have been found to be an effective tool for identifying automobiles that have been stolen or are associated with someone who has a warrant out for his/her arrest. Additionally, they can potentially be a helpful investigative tool for solving crimes and can also be a crime deterrent. Chief Michael Cronin from Tiburon reported that “Part 1” crimes in Tiburon (defined as serious crimes that occur regularly in all areas of the country and likely to be reported to police) went down by one-third when the stationary cameras were installed. He attributes this success in a large part to the camera’s preventive nature -- the theory being that the publicity surrounding the installation kept (and continues to keep) criminals out of the area. According to Chief Cronin, the cameras help in solving about 10% of their cases each year. He emphasizes, however, that Tiburon, logistically, is an ideal set up for use of these devices as there is only road in and out of the town. In an area such as Greenbrae/Kentfield, which has many side streets and heavy traffic volume during the day, identifying a wanted vehicle would be more challenging than for a jurisdiction such as Tiburon.

LPRs do have limitations per solving the kind of crimes taking place in Greenbrae/Kentfield as they are primarily intended to detect the presence of a stolen car, not to create a database from which potential burglary suspects can be traced. LPRs can help prove a particular car was in the area when a particular crime occurred, but in the Greenbrae/Kentfield area, that means having to manually run hundreds of license plates that could be expected to pass by a particular camera in a relatively short period of time. This would be time/cost prohibitive for all but the most serious of crimes.

Cost

LPRs are not cheap. The cost per camera (excluding installation, software and maintenance) is approximately \$10,000 (for either stationary or mobile) and you must have one camera for each lane of traffic when used at multi-lane locations. Cost of an effective LPR system for the Greenbrae/Kentfield area would be significant given the multiple points for ingress/egress. The Greenbrae area north of Sir Francis Drake would be approximately \$100,000 if cameras were installed to cover the five (one lane each direction) entrance and exit points in the area. This figure does not take into account installation and ongoing costs. The total one-time cost to Tiburon for installation of six cameras (for 2 multi-lane entrances) was about \$120,000 -- \$60,000 for the devices and about \$60,000 to install.

Central Marin Police Authority's LPR Grant

Central Marin has applied for a \$135,000 grant to install two LPRs on Sir Francis Drake near the ferry terminal. They expect approval by the end of the calendar year. CMPA applied for this grant after conducting a crime reduction strategy study that determined that the majority of vehicles stolen in Marin were recovered in the East Bay and points to the Sir Francis Drake corridor as a key route for those perpetrating the auto thefts. The report also supports the concept that crime reduction strategies applied along the Sir Francis Drake corridor could be helpful in the Greenbrae/Kentfield area generally. If the grant is awarded, the installation of the LPRs will be accompanied by an extensive publicity campaign to take advantage of their preventative nature. Central Marin's pilot program on Sir Frances Drake should provide a good indication of the potential effectiveness and opportunities for expanded use of LPRs in the Greenbrae/Kentfield area.

Additional Means of Crime Reduction

The Sheriff and CMPA stress that enhanced communication between law enforcement and residents, law enforcement visibility, and preventative steps taken by residents are the most affordable, effective and sustainable means of reducing crime. With or without LPR cameras, reporting suspicious activity and any theft (large or small) in as timely a manner as possible is critically important. In addition, residents should take advantage of Crimereports.com (Sheriff's Office) and register on Central Marin's "Next Door" network to stay abreast of crime trends in your area. Finally, basic preventative measures, such as always locking car and home doors, keeping valuables out of plain sight and notifying neighbors when you are going to be out of town, are key to reducing "crimes of opportunity" -- the most common type of crime experienced in our community.

Home Alarm/Camera Systems

For residents looking to take additional preventative measures, our local law enforcement agencies highly recommend home alarm and/or camera systems as a cost effective means of deterring crimes, or in the case of cameras, of capturing images of the actual crime suspect should the deterrent factor be inadequate. These images can be valuable tools in helping police solve crimes/apprehend criminals. Wireless security cameras (e.g. Internet Protocol cameras) are becoming more popular due to their low installation costs and flexible mounting options and they allow users to leverage broadband wireless internet to provide seamless video streaming over the internet.