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Security cameras added to amenities

High-tech surveillance enters residential market

By Matt Garfield · mgarfield@heraldonline.com

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Jim Stratakos • jstratakos@heraldonline.com
Pepper Ridge Apartments in Rock Hill uses security cameras to help deter would-be burglars and bandits. The apartment complex where Michael McEachern lives comes with all the usual amenities -- a swimming pool, laundry room, fitness center and free cable. But the 14-camera security system is what stood out when McEachern decided to move in this summer.

High-tech surveillance is common in big-city thoroughfares and gathering spots, partly in response to terrorism fears but also as added security against everyday crimes.

Now, the trend is going residential: Pepper Ridge Apartments and a handful of other apartment complexes in Rock Hill are equipped with similar camera systems.

Wireless cameras keep watch over Pepper Ridge, just off Interstate 77 near Manchester Village, providing a sense of safety for McEachern and other tenants and, they hope, a

deterrent for would-be bandits and burglars.

"Where I came from up in Matthews (N.C.), they were breaking into cars, there were a couple of muggings," McEachern said. "If they at least keep it from pointing directly at my house, I'm OK. In these times, it's all well worth it."

Invasion of privacy?

Maybe it's a sign of the times that some Pepper Ridge residents interviewed by The Herald this week didn't seem concerned about the potential for an invasion of privacy.

"If somebody busted out my window or something, it'd be nice to at least have a possibility it was caught on camera," said tenant Josh Patterson. "(And) maybe catch the people."

The company that installed the cameras said the privacy question doesn't apply because Pepper Ridge is a privately-owned complex.

"You can have that concern if the government is behind it," said Bob Dunlap, CEO of WildFire Connections. "When this is an apartment owner trying to create a safer environment for his tenants, it should be considered an amenity that's a huge plus."

A proactive approach

Mindful that crime at apartment complexes often runs much higher than in other residential areas, the management at Pepper Ridge spent \$30,000 to install the cameras this summer.

Police will have access to real-time video from their in-car computers.

Property manager Lee Thomasson said Pepper Ridge hasn't run into any unusual crime problems during its 10-year history. But he also knows its proximity to high-traffic roads and shopping centers makes it vulnerable. The goal, he said, is to be proactive.

"We wanted to be on the cutting edge of security," Thomasson said. "We felt it was best to be prepared for the future. These cameras are a way of ensuring security."

Police can use the cameras to respond to anything from drug activity and car break-ins to nighttime prowlers, said Rock Hill police Lt. Mike Peek. The number of calls for service at Pepper Ridge is similar to other complexes around town, Peek said.

Police do not identify which complexes have cameras.

Whether cameras actually reduce crime is an open question. A recent study done in Glasgow, Scotland, found the crime rate in areas where cameras were installed was not significantly lower than areas without cameras.

Officers don't regularly monitor footage, Peek said, but rather use it in responding to problems.

"If we're having an identifiable problem, we can use that as another tool to do some surveillance and try to keep an eye on things," he said. "It's just another way to monitor crime."

Matt Garfield • 329-4063

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