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Smile for the Camera

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Eye in the sky: A surveillance camera the Surf City Police Department is testing is mounted near the top of a utility pole, left, in the area of Roland Avenue and gives the police a 360-degree, real-time feed.

SURF CITY - The police in Topsail Island's largest town have the most popular spot on the beach covered 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

A recently installed video camera now offers a 360-degree, real-time feed of beachgoers at Surf City's Roland Avenue public beach access.

The Roland Avenue access has a large pavilion area that has become a popular hangout with surfers and teenagers. The pavilion has developed into a high crime area in recent years, Assistant Police Chief Ron Shanahan said.

"We have fights, drugs and alcohol all driving our families away from the beach," Shanahan said. "This is a way to rid the area of crime and open the access back up to families."

The camera has paid off already with a drug bust and arrests made for public consumption of alcohol, Shanahan said.

Mounted to a utility pole on Roland Avenue, the infrared video camera has a 16x zoom that, Shanahan said, is strong enough to allow police to see what fishermen are wearing on the Surf City Pier. And it can zoom right up to people on the beach access and take pictures of them drinking alcohol - pictures Shanahan said would be used in court to help get a conviction.

The camera can also help police monitor how close surfers get to the Surf City Pier, Shanahan said. An ordinance passed last year prohibits surfers from coming within 300 feet of it.

"And, God forbid it should happen, but the camera would be able to help us monitor the waves and conditions during a hurricane," he said.

The camera and the monitoring equipment that goes with it are being test driven by the police department. Shanahan said that if the department chooses to purchase the camera, it comes with an \$8,600 price tag.

Right now, the police can monitor and control the dome swivel camera from the police station, but the department hopes to be able to allow officers to do the same thing from their individual police vehicles by July.

Some surfers who hang out at the access said that they feel the police are violating their freedoms.

"I don't think it's right for them to watch us like that all day long," said Brent High, a local surfer who frequents the beach access.

But Shanahan said the camera is no more intrusive than having an officer posted there.

"We tried that and it is just too costly and manpower prohibitive to have an officer there all the time," Shanahan said. "But with the camera, we can monitor a high crime area and make it safe again for our families."

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