Some Port officials say surveillance vehicle could help stem downtown vandalism but others worry about privacy

The Port Washington Police Department is considering borrowing a mobile camera unit from Ozaukee County to monitor downtown streets and prevent vandalism, including the destruction of trees, the Police and Fire Commission was told Monday.

But not everyone is sold on the idea.

“It feels so Big Brother,” commission member Gina Taucher said. “How much more effective would that be than increased patrols?”

The department does not have the manpower to provide increased patrols, officials said.

“It (the surveillance unit) is not the whole answer,” Captain Mike Keller said. “It’s a tool and it may help. It can be a deterrent.”

Commission Chairman Rick Nelson said the nighttime bike patrols have also helped deter vandalism.

“The downtown patrol has been a huge help,” he said.

City officials and representatives of the Main Street Program have said they, too, are ready to consider installing a surveillance camera in downtown because of the amount of vandalism.

One of the most visible examples is the destruction of at least seven trees planted along Franklin Street since the road was rebuilt in 2008.

A month ago, two ginkgo trees had to be replaced after they were snapped by vandals.

A week after that, two people were cited for trying to destroy trees in downtown.

Nelson noted that downtown merchants looked into the concept of downtown surveillance cameras two years ago after a spate of vandalism, but nothing was done.

“The business district was not supportive of the idea then,” he said.

But cameras have become less intrusive and more common since that time, Nelson said.

Many communities require new businesses to install security cameras, he said, whether people realize they are there or not.

“There’s always that fine line, are we going to be perceived as Big Brother watching everything?” he said. “We don’t want that.”

Using the county’s camera unit to monitor downtown at select times may be one way to combat vandalism, Nelson said.

On Fish Day, the police used the pole-mounted surveillance camera system recently acquired by the Ozaukee County Emergency Government Department to monitor the downtown, he noted.

The system, which has a number of cameras that can provide a 360-degree view, can be remotely monitored.

“They were pretty impressive in what you can see and do with them,” Nelson said of the pictures obtained by the unit.

Police Chief Richard Thomas is looking into how often the city could use the vehicle to remotely monitor downtown, Keller said.

No matter what the city does downtown, Nelson said, officials must be sure the business community will support it.

The commission is expected to continue its discussion of cameras downtown when it meets next month.

OZAUIKEE COUNTY'S recently acquired surveillance vehicle may be used to stem vandalism in downtown Port Washington, but some officials have expressed concerns about privacy rights. Press file photo