

OUR VIEW

You're about to be on candid camera. Smile?

Have you ever wanted to be in the movies? You will be, if you visit downtown Venice or the festival grounds after the city has surveillance cameras installed.

Whether you want to be or not.

On April 23, the city awarded a a \$223,000 contract for the installation of eight cameras downtown and three at the festival grounds. In a later phase, cameras are to be installed at the pier and the South Jetty.

Approval of the contract was expected, so it was put on the meeting's consent agenda. It got pulled for discussion, but only because the Council members wanted to be reassured the city wouldn't be facing potentially costly public records requests for recordings and no one would be added to the city's payroll to monitor the cameras.

Security camera recordings are exempt from the state's Sunshine Law, they were told, and the cameras aren't going to be monitored. They'll record what passes in front of them and the recordings will be retained for 30 days unless needed.

Satisfied, the Council voted 6-0 to approve the contract. Council Member Mitzie Fiedler was absent.

"It's the way that we have to go to secure our city," Council Member Bob Daniels said, seeming to sum up the sentiment of his colleagues.

In our opinion, this issue deserved far more discussion.

Surveillance cameras have three basic functions: deterring crime, interrupting crime as it happens and providing evidence in an investigation.

Since the city's cameras won't be monitored, they won't be of any help in interrupting a crime in progress. Their benefit will be in investigations and deterrence, the latter of which will be based entirely on their presence, not the nonexistent prospect of being watched by an eye in the sky.

Will there be any signs to alert people to the presence of the cameras, to influence their conduct? There's nothing about it in the contract and no one on the Council asked.

The cameras themselves will be a warning, to the extent they're conspicuous, but one of them is described this way: "With its compact size and repaintable surface, it will easily blend into the surroundings."

The public has also been left in the dark about:

- Whether the city has a policy regarding the cameras — who can access the recordings and for what purpose; how access will be tracked; whether there are any safeguards against the use of recordings other than for the purpose for which they've been accessed.

The city needs to have standards in place because there are no applicable laws at any level. Florida has a couple of criminal statutes on video voyeurism, but they pertain to recording people “in a dwelling, structure or conveyance,” not on the street.

- What the current and future capabilities of the system are — audio recording, night recording, visual acuity, facial-recognition technology. There was no presentation on the system and the details in the contract are skimpy.

There was no discussion about whether these cameras actually do any good.

Some studies have shown that while they aid in the identification of suspects, their deterrent effect is less than expected. To the extent that crime in the area they cover goes down, it can be the result of what's called “the displacement effect”: Criminals move to areas where there aren't any cameras.

Last, but not least, there's the issue of privacy — or more accurately, what law professor Christopher Slobogin calls the “right to anonymity.”

These cameras will record indiscriminately, capturing bad behavior, good behavior and anything in between. That could include perfectly legal actions that someone would rather not have a record of — say, having a drink with the “wrong” person, or at the “wrong” time.

In the “wrong” hands, that information could be misused. That's why detailed policies regulating access to and the use of such recordings are needed.

Now, as long as the recordings Venice's system make are rarely viewed, the risk is minimal. The public deserves to know that enough has been done to ensure it will stay that way.