

PALO ALTO DAILY NEWS

Thursday Feb 8

Gunfire detection tech eyed

ShotSpotter system already running in Redwood City, Oakland

By Banks Albach / Daily News Staff Writer

East Palo Alto got a glimpse this week of a high-tech crime fighting device, one that pinpoints gunshots through sound waves and claims to give police a better chance of nabbing the shooter.

Police Chief Ron Davis reported on the ShotSpotter system to the East Palo Alto City Council Tuesday night. If installed in the city, it would cover a two-square-mile area at a cost of \$400,000.

When a shot is fired, the system's series of coffee pot-like canisters pinpoints the shooter's position and send a GPS coordinate to dispatch within a few seconds. Dispatch can either relay street names to officers, or send them to a GPS console in a squad car.

"Minneapolis is up and running for about a month and a half now, and they've had five arrests from gunshots that didn't come through dispatch," said Gregg Rowland, senior vice president of sales and marketing for ShotSpotter.

Davis did not return phone calls by press time.

While it seems a valuable tool, East Palo Alto Mayor David Woods said the system comes at a "hefty" cost and needs manpower to back it up.

"I think it will do no good if we know where the shot was coming from within a matter of seconds, but don't have the personnel to respond," Woods said.

Redwood City was the first city in San Mateo County to employ the technology in 1995, and Oakland just set it up last summer. Rowland said San Francisco and Richmond are considering a purchase from the Santa Clara-based company as well. Dozens of cities around the country are using it, Rowland said.

In Oakland, which has suffered multiple homicides this year, knowing where a shot is fired could spell the difference between life and death, said Officer Roland Holmgren, the department's spokesman.

"Unfortunately, people get accustomed to hearing gunshots," Holmgren said. "We have homicides where people don't call the police. When officers get on the scene, they might also find living victims."

In recent years, New Year's Eve revelers in Redwood City have fired guns in the air, posing a danger to bystanders. After implementation of the location devices, along with extensive public outreach warning of arrest, the celebratory gunfire has decreased, said police Capt. Ron Matuszak.

But making arrests through the ShotSpotter system has proven more difficult, Matuszak said.

"We might get there fairly soon," he said. But "most people don't stand around after they shoot a gun, they take off."

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