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High-tech gunshot pinpointer touted

EXPENSIVE GPS-BASED TOOL AIMS TO GIVE PATROL OFFICERS A JUMP ON FLEEING GUNMEN

By Banks Albach
MediaNews

Buffeted by a series of shootings this year, East Palo Alto this week got a glimpse of a new crime-fighting tool -- a high-tech system that uses sound waves to pinpoint the source of gunshots and hopefully give police a better chance at nabbing shooters.

Police Chief Ron Davis presented the ShotSpotter system to the East Palo Alto City Council on Tuesday night. If the \$400,000 system were installed in the city, it would cover two square miles.

Whenever a shot is fired, the system's series of coffee-pot-like canisters are supposed to identify the shooter's position and send a global-positioning system coordinate to police dispatchers within seconds. Dispatchers can either relay street names to officers, or direct 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" because of the system, said Gregg Rowland, senior vice president of sales and marketing for ShotSpotter, based in Santa Clara.

Davis could not be reached for comment Wednesday night.

While it seems a valuable tool, East Palo Alto Mayor David Woods said, the system comes at a "` hefty" cost and needs staffing 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 installed it last summer. Rowland said San Francisco and Richmond are considering a purchase as well. Dozens of cities around the country are using it, Rowland said.

In Oakland, besieged by a surge of homicides last year, knowing where shots are fired could spell the difference between life and death, said officer Roland Holmgren.

"` 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. Since the city has installed the system, the celebratory gunfire has decreased, police Capt. Ron Matuszak said.

But making arrests through the ShotSpotter system has proven 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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