

County/City Cooperation Cleans Crime from Community

By Keith Jentoft, Videofed



The 36th Street Trailhead in Tucson is the gateway to the beautiful Pima County trail system but it had become a threat to neighboring residents and a crime magnet in the community. The remote parking lot offered young adults an unsupervised venue that encouraged drugs, parties and other crime and left the neighborhood frustrated and fearful. The remote site was difficult to protect; isolated all by itself at the extreme edge of law enforcement patrols. The trailhead became popular as the hangout of choice and things degraded further when vandals chained a truck to the access gate and pulled it into pieces of twisted metal. The parking lot was overrun with litter, bottles, paraphernalia and graffiti; these leftovers from a constant stream of parties welcomed any who attempted to access the county trails.

Beyond the logistical challenges of the remote location high in the hills on the edges of Tucson, there were jurisdictional complications that also made this site particularly difficult to deal with. The raucous clamor of wild parties carries long distances across the barren desert hills to the neighborhoods at the edge of Tucson. In the spring of 2012, residents began complaining to the authorities and these complaints grew louder as things decayed; but these upset citizens ran into jurisdictional problems. The access road and the parking lot

belonged to the city of Tucson and their police dept. but the moment a shoe left the asphalt it was in the county park and fell under the jurisdiction of the Pima County Sheriff. The situation was aggravated in that the 911 calls for a community disturbance typically happened on weekend nights when the police patrols were giving priority response to life threatening situations in their patrol area. Community disturbance was low on the list. Because the trailhead was isolated at the extreme edge of the patrol area, it was often three and four hours before a patrol car arrived and the crowds had already left. By the summer of 2012, the residents went to Pima County Sheriff demanding action. The project ultimately fell to Pima County Risk Management director, Sarah Horvath, to resolve. Sarah contacted Sgt. George Economivis of the Pima County Sheriff's Office to put together a plan that used a combination of technology and a strong collaborative approach bringing together the Sheriff's office and the Tucson Police to make the project successful.

Sgt. Economivis contacted Captain Ramon Batista of Tucson Police Department regarding the trailhead parking area. A quick inspection showed that leaning up the site itself was a priority. Captain Batista assigned new Tucson police academy graduates, Erin Winans and Isaac Grenandos, to the 36th

Trailhead project to fulfill their community service requirement. The new graduates launched themselves into the effort. They recruited support from local businesses and reached out to the local high school for volunteers. Ultimately they organized a “clean-up day” that got the job done. Local businesses donated pizza for lunch, the county supplied brooms, cleaning supplies as well as paint and brushes. Sarah Horvath, Sgt. Economivus, and Captain Batista led a team working with high school students to remove trash, repaint over graffiti and parking lines. By the end of the week they also replaced the entry gate; the 36th Street Trailhead was a clean slate to welcome hikers in to the county park system.

While the commitment to solve the problems was strong, budgets were limited. CCTV cameras and DVRs were simply too expensive and too vulnerable to install in such a remote location. Gunshots were routinely heard and posed a threat to expensive camera systems. Instead, Sarah worked with a local integrator and chose a wireless video alarm system that had already proven successful at protecting remote electrical substations and communications towers. The technology solution was unique because it was not “surveillance” in the typical sense but an event-based video alarm; a wireless system that combines a motion sensor and a night vision camera into a single device the size of a coffee cup and operates years on a single set of AA batteries. When the sensor trips, the video alarm sends a 10 second clip of what caused the event over the cell network to a monitoring station for immediate review and dispatch. Up to 24 individual sensor/cameras communicate wirelessly to the battery-powered hub the size of a laptop; in this case the weatherproof hub was attached high on a nearby power pole (*see illustration*). The hub has an internal cell modem that sends the video alarm to the monitoring station. The entirely battery-powered system was simple to deploy and the fist-sized



motionviewer sensors were easy to hide in the surrounding area. One motionviewer was inserted into a convenient woodpecker hole in a nearby saguaro cactus – the cactus cam (*see illustration*). Saguaro cacti are protected and it would be impossible to install wired cameras in or on the cactus. The technology solution would provide timely alerts on activity at the site as well as the scale of the activity itself.

While the video alarm system belonged to the county, the job of protecting the newly rehabilitated park entrance fell on the Tucson Police Dept. because the asphalt still belonged to the city. Working with Sgt. Economivus of the Sheriff’s office, Captain Batista changed the response policy of his patrols to raise the priority of response to the 36th Street Trailhead. Sgt. Economivus worked with the security company actually monitoring the alarms coordinating the response at the PSAP. When the monitoring center would call in the video alarms to the call taker in the 911 center, the monitoring operator would describe the activity they actually saw at the 36th Street Trailhead, acting like a remote eyewitness. The 911 dispatcher would then broadcast the event with the description to the patrols. Even though the activity itself might not have been life threatening, Captain Batista instructed his patrols to give high priority response to a trailhead event. It is extremely important to note that because there was a video eyewitness, the responding officers were able to tailor their response to the specific situation and call in backup as needed. There were many times where the monitoring station would indicate eight or ten cars at the trailhead allowing the responding officers to radio for backup before approaching the site. This was especially important as gunshots and gun activity was a common issue at the trailhead. The video confirmation meant that the extra patrols called in were not wasted on a false alarm or single intruder. The county worked hard not to waste the police resources.

The statistics tell the story of what happened during the next few months. Over 30 arrests for a cross section of crimes



including DUI, minor in possession, narcotics, robbery, carjacking, criminal damage, guns, and stolen vehicles. The impact to the community went far beyond the arrest of a few dozen individuals, the crime patterns themselves changed and the trailhead was restored. Apparently social media among the perpetrators broadcast the fact that the 36th Street Trailhead was no longer the party destination, the crime stopped or went elsewhere. The surrounding community noticed. The calm and improved sense of security was tangible to the residents who sent letters and emails to both the Sheriff's Office and the Police Dept. thanking them for what had happened. Pima County Natural Resources Parks and Recreation was pleased with how the city/county cooperation transformed a significant eyesore and safety risk into a welcoming park entrance that enhanced their entire trail system.

The success of the project was a combined effort of county and city that benefited their common citizen. Without the ability to verify the activity in such a remote site, timely response would have been difficult if not impossible. In addition, the potential of a single patrol car arriving to find crowds and guns increased the risk for the responders. Ultimately, the wireless video alarm was an affordable technology tool to make this success possible. According to Captain Batista, the video alarm itself was never discovered or vandalized. The battery powered camera/sensors were small enough to blend into the overall environment and functioned as "covert" even though the cameras themselves were off-the-shelf products. Sarah Horvath of Pima County Risk Management has expanded this project and there are now two additional "mobile" video alarm systems, deployed as situations and risks change. Currently one of these systems is being responded to by Pima County Sheriff deputies and the other by Tucson police officers but this changes depending upon the locations being protected. ✪

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