

The way of the future—Police going high-tech

Shannon Hagerman—The Daily Gleaner

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A laptop inside a police patrol vehicle beeps to signal a call is coming in.

The officer seated inside, Cpl. Mike Richard of the Fredericton Police Department, glances at the screen and reads an incident report that lists the address he's being electronically dispatched to.

He pauses for a moment and hits the letter M.

In a matter of seconds, a map of the city of Fredericton appears that pinpoints the exact location of the address. Using keyboard controls he zooms in and out of the map, studying how he should position himself and his fellow officers once he arrives on the scene.

He types a message and forwards it to the King Street police office, signaling that he is responding to the call.

He reads more of the screen that's mounted beside his steering wheel in the front seat. It tells him a suspect has been sighted in the area. He presses another button and in seconds the subject's picture appears.

Before Richard even arrives on the scene he is better informed about the location, the situation and the suspect than ever before possible.

It's all thanks to technology and it could be available to Fredericton police officers as soon as June 2000.

"This is just like being in the police station, only better," said Richard, who is project manager of the police team working on bringing the wireless computer technology to Fredericton. "It's like the officer has a mobile office right with them inside the car."

If city council gives the needed go ahead, the Fredericton force would become the first city force in the province to use the wireless computer technology that has a myriad of applications for officers in the field.

Richard showcased the new technology on Wednesday for members of the media at the Association of Public Safety Communications Officials' annual conference at the Sheraton Hotel in Fredericton.

It's the newest weapon police can use in their high-tech arsenal against crime and by some estimates it will put 33 per cent more officers on the streets. Paperwork has always been the bane of officers who've long said it eats up precious time they could be spending in the community.

With the new computer system, officers can do their paperwork in their patrol cars, e-mail and even talk to each other over the system without reaching for a radio that is often listened to by the very people they are trying to arrest.

The secured wireless data unit would electronically link officers with the dispatch centre, thereby cutting the back and forth discussions heard over the scanner.



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It provides a vast information resource for officers and emergency officials. Queries can be made to national and provincial databases, and officers can read each other's daily logs. They can even run a car's license plate at a red light and know everything about the vehicle before the light turns green.

The system has a broad range of implications for the way police officers do their job but it doesn't only entail police.

It's been proposed that all of Fredericton's municipal departments, from fire officials to transit drivers, even public works officials, could be using a new laptop system similar to the one Richard demonstrated on Wednesday.

While confidential information would be encrypted, all city departments would function on the same radio system, giving them the ability to communicate seamlessly with each other in case of emergency.

No one is saying how much it will cost to implement the vast system across all city departments but everyone agrees it is one of the most ambitious communications plans the city has ever embarked on.

"This will definitely change the way we do everything here in the city," said Const. Roger Shannon, who's been appointed project manager of implementing the citywide communication project.

Shannon said the project is something emergency workers and the city have examined for quite some time. For the past six months, work on the project has intensified, he said, adding it is proposed that all city departments be brought online by the end of 2002.

Technical and software requirements are being purchased from companies like Ottawa-based Versaterm that is already providing the force with an updated mug-shot system. Also involved are NBTel Mobility, Motorola and Panasonic.

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