



PD Leverages Portable Tech To Effectively Fight A Rash of Property Crime

The Small, Disciplined Los Gatos Police Force Has a Public Safety Breakthrough

At the nexus of growing economic wealth and rising income inequality in Northern California, serious property crime, such as car break-ins, has reached epidemic proportions throughout the Silicon Valley. In 2017, there were more than 31,000 car break-ins in San Francisco, about 10,000 in Oakland and almost 6,500 in San Jose.

In February 2018, police in Fremont, a Silicon Valley city northeast of San Jose, arrested multiple suspects allegedly part of an international gang that has been accused of stealing electronics and then “fencing” or selling them to black markets in Vietnam. Local law enforcement officers suspect that this is part of a larger operation, funneling expensive electronic equipment stolen in the Silicon Valley into an international market of ill-gotten tech.

Communities around the Silicon Valley are struggling with similar problems. As a small residential community west of sprawling San Jose, Los Gatos might be considered the tip of this iceberg of stolen electronics. While property crime in Los Gatos is comparatively low to that in nearby large cities, car break-ins have become disturbingly common, especially downtown.

Industry:

City & Government

Location:

California

Application:

Rapid and portable License Plate Reader and Video Surveillance

Solution:

OnSight™ Portable License Plate Reader

OnSight™ Portable Surveillance Unit

Headlines from the local paper, The San Jose Mercury News, tell the story: On December 21, 2017, “Auto burglars are very busy in Los Gatos this holiday season;” and on January 25, 2018, “Six auto burglaries reported in 33 minutes in Los Gatos.”

These petty crimes can end up being very expensive to victims. A computer laptop or tablet can easily cost thousands, as can vehicle repair. Perhaps, most importantly, these crimes make victims feel unsafe and targeted in their own communities.

Detective Harold Hoyt of the Los Gatos Police Department, a long-time Bay Area resident, has been on multiple Silicon Valley police forces in his lengthy law enforcement career. He has witnessed evolving local crime trends on the ground.

“Thieves would strike close to dinnertime, or on the weekend. Burglary carries less of a prison sentence than drug crimes, and it’s just less dangerous. Criminals were discovering they could run less risk and make far more money selling stolen property than they could selling drugs,” explains Detective Hoyt. “We were getting five or 10 calls a night. Anyone who stopped to grab dinner downtown was at risk of having items stolen from their cars.”

Property Crime Can Be Tricky to Address

Detective Hoyt says that the police department of this idyllic town was intent on finding a way to address the smash-and-grab challenge.

- Since the community is small, it supports a smaller police force; this can be challenging when addressing several major issues simultaneously. “Five lots downtown had the biggest problems,” Hoyt says. “We were in the position of having to deploy five patrol cars to those five lots. That took out an entire team. We talked about deploying undercover officers, but again, that would take up all our resources on this one problem.”
- In addition, Hoyt explains, if officers didn’t catch a thief on the spot, following up could be a difficult, nonlinear process. The suspects usually came from other towns in Silicon Valley, and it could be difficult to identify them.
- Even more challenging, the department had to consider the circumstances of potential apprehension - the goal has always been to lower the risk to the community and officers during an arrest and to take suspects into custody on the PD’s terms. High-speed car chases and possible gunfire would put the public at further risk.

Hoyt, known as a thorough and disciplined investigator, has long championed technology solutions to enhance investigations. Hoyt says that officers knew that video surveillance could help deter and catch thieves, and the department went on a search to find the best product for their problem. Some early attempts to solve the problem didn’t work because the available communication network didn’t have the bandwidth to capture good video quality.

Smart Technology Can Help Overcome Traditional Public Safety Barriers

Then, the PD learned about V5 Systems, a Silicon Valley technology company with a team of dedicated former law enforcement who understood the security challenges unique to local police departments. With a platform that can run independently of existing IT infrastructure, communication networks and fixed power supply, the solution was turnkey and did not have a steep implementation curve.

The department invested in several complementary solutions: the OnSight Portable License Plate Reader, the OnSight Portable Surveillance Unit with Video Streaming, V5 Solar Panels and the OnPower Portable Auxiliary Power Unit.

They were impressed that V5 Systems technology could be implemented quickly, in under 30 minutes per unit, since the systems are designed as preconfigured and all-in-one.

“The ability to move it easily, the ability to stream video without having to locate the network, the power supply, and the fact that that could be exterior—all these were big sells,” Hoyt says. “Those things, and the license plate reader have been key.”



Recovering Property and Improving Quality of Life for the Community

Where once the Los Gatos Police felt frustrated by the car thieves, now Hoyt says the department has an efficient, affordable response. All the officers in the force are aware of the new technology, Hoyt says.

“The devices are symbiotic, they work off each other,” Hoyt explains. “The report comes in, and through the video, I know how they’re acting, how they drive. They drive past the license plate reader, and it picks up their plate. I wouldn’t be able to identify the suspect without the video and I wouldn’t be able to get the plate without the LPR.”

Already, the system has begun to deliver results:

Since deployment, nearly 12 possible suspects have been identified because of data captured by the V5 Systems devices deployed in downtown Los Gatos.

No need for a potentially violent confrontation. The OnSight LPR makes it possible for officers to follow up using Department of Motor Vehicle records. Just run the plate, get a name and address and go from there.

In just the last month alone, five suspect vehicles have been identified and two arrest warrants issued. Los Gatos officers have been able to share data with other jurisdictions, helping nearby towns to solve their cases.

Hoyt has been fielding questions from law enforcement professionals who have challenges similar to those in Los Gatos.

“If we didn’t have the V5 Systems devices, we’d have zero apprehensions,” Hoyt says. “We just wouldn’t have the data.”

Summary

Organization

Los Gatos Police Department is a small, tech-savvy police force tasked with keeping the residents of Los Gatos, California safe.

Problem

An upscale California town with a rash of auto burglaries, related to a region-wide uptick in property crime, wanted to increase public safety within the constraints of a small-town budget and the desire for a low profile.

Solution

The OnSight Portable License Plate Reader was deployed to capture plate numbers of miscreants with high forensic detail. The OnSight Portable Surveillance Unit with Video Streaming was deployed as a force multiplier, providing officers with an extra set of eyes and ears. The units were equipped with solar and auxiliary power, with the ability to connect to AC power when appropriate.

Results

Already, 12 suspects have been apprehended with this system, and the units have given officers an edge in the public safety arena.