

THE PEACE ARCH NEWS

Vol. 28 No. 4

Voice of the Semiahmoo Peninsula

Saturday, Jan. 25, 2003



Tuning out alarms *Police losing patience with false calls*

by Tracy Holmes

Staff Reporter

A change in how police respond to burglar alarms is sweeping the United States, and rolling onto Vancouver Island.

In Surrey, a verified response system—where police only attend alarm calls confirmed by audio, video or eyewitness—is an idea police admit is under review.

"We are looking at differential response options," Surrey RCMP Const. Tim Shields said last week.

"We're continually assessing what we do and how we do it."

Shields described false alarms as "the thorn in the side of any large police force," and noted last year they made up nine per cent—12,400—of the 140,000 calls RCMP attended.

Shields said how to deal with the issue that wastes "vast resources" has come up many times. First, there was a bylaw fine of \$75. Next came an ordinance that officers not respond to business alarms between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. Monday to Friday, under normal circumstances.

"It's taking up too much of our time," Shields explained.

RCMP spend 3.5 hours per shift responding to false alarms.

Victoria Police Department Staff Sgt. Kevin Worth said the cost per alarm—a priority call—there is \$140. And, he said, 98 per cent of those alarms are triggered by the owner, technical errors or power outages.

False alarms—with as many as two officers and a dog team yanked from other calls—put both officers and the public at risk, Worth said. Officers know the call is likely false, and can become complacent in responding, and it slows response time to concurrent calls.

"The risk is not worth the reward," he said.

Following the lead of forces in Eugene, Salt Lake City, Las Vegas and Los Angeles, Victoria PD moves to verified response system April 1.

"We're looking at about \$400,000 (annual) savings—no pittance," Worth said.

"It's certainly going to free our folks up to do more important work. If I thought the safety



Above, Joe Wilson of Sonitrol shows the verified active audio sensors and infra-red video that his firm provides to clients across North America.

"We completely support the police initiative to eliminate response to conventional alarms that have a 98% false alarm rate." "Why would anyone buy something that 98% of the time does not work?"

of citizens were at risk, we wouldn't be doing it."

Describing the move as an innovative one likely to catch the eye of other Canadian police agencies, Worth predicted it will also generate a boom in private guard-response companies aiming to fill the gap. Already in Victoria, two such companies have sprung up.

White Rock's Joe Wilson, who heads up Sonitrol—an alarm company that offers real-time audio and/or video monitoring, and claims priority-one police response across North America—agreed that industry will swell as detachments come on board.

But he predicted it won't satisfy public expectation of protection and speedy police response.

He also agreed it's only a matter of time before local detachments follow Victoria's lead.

"It's the way it's going," Wilson said.

"The police need to do this."

Valley Alarms general manager Doug Powell said his company has been gearing up for the change "for some time." While less than 10 per cent of his clients use a verified alarm sys-

tem, he predicts some will object to the shift. But he reluctantly supports the move.

"I guess I have to. I don't think I have any choice," Powell said.

"Police resources are strapped—this seems like a logical conclusion."

White Rock RCMP Const. Steve Whiffen said while there's no plans to implement a verified response system here, the detachment will note any moves in that direction taken in Surrey.

In White Rock and South Surrey, more than 95 per cent of home and business alarms are false.

Neither police detachments dispatch as a priority unless there's confirmation a crime is in progress.

South Surrey Staff Sgt. Jim McNamara, asked his opinion on verified-only response, said risks of not attending a call that could be real must be weighed.

He said police encourage ownership and use of alarm systems, but "with that comes a responsibility to know how to use them."

"Any false alarm is too many," McNamara said.

"If we can reduce the number of these complaints we have to go to, it frees up police resources to do more important things."