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## Big Brother is Riding the No. 49 Bus

By [Keith Vance](#)

While there's been some scrutiny in the media and by the Seattle City Council regarding the dozen or so video cameras Mayor Nickels is planning to install in Seattle city parks, no one seems to have a problem with King County Metro installing more than 2,800 video cameras on select city buses.

The American Civil Liberties Union is usually the first to cry foul when government sees fit to install video surveillance cameras in public places, but this time, barely a whisper.

"It's something we don't care for," said Doug Honig, communications director for the Washington state ACLU. He said there was some concern that the cameras were recording audio; however, since they're recording video only, the ACLU isn't worried about them.

Ann Corbitt of Seattle council member Tom Rasmussen's office said that she was under the impression that the cameras weren't working, even though the cameras are recording. Corbitt said that since Metro is a King County bureaucracy, the city council has no oversight power.

For King County executive Ron Sims, the cameras are a non-issue.

"It's not something he would weigh in on," said Natasha Jones, deputy director of communications for Sims' office.

She said that in the grand scheme of things \$3 million is just not a lot of money in comparison to Metro's biennial budget of more than \$1 billion.

According to Jim Jacobsen, the Metro deputy manager, right now there are 100 buses equipped with surveillance cameras. These cameras have been in operation for about three years and were installed, Jacobsen said for security reasons. What concerns Metro are attacks against bus drivers.

Every year there are about 100 incidents in which a passenger assaults a bus driver, said Jacobsen. An assault is any unwanted touching, he said, including spitting.

The basic theory behind installing video cameras for security purposes is that if someone knows they're being recorded, they're less likely to do something stupid.

However, the act of spitting on the bus driver is an irrational

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one; therefore, it's not necessarily a foregone conclusion that the rational concern for being video taped will act as a deterrent against the irrational behavior of spitting on another human being.

Both Jacobsen and King Country council member Larry Phillips, who supports the program, said there has been a slight reduction in assaults since the cameras were installed three years ago. Neither of Jacobsen nor Phillips could provide statistics showing that the video cameras improved security on the buses.

One bus passenger who just moved to Seattle from Ann Arbor, Mich., had mixed feelings about the cameras. "It's public transportation, so I don't see the harm," said Linzy George. But on the other hand, if they haven't seen a decrease in assaults, she said, "I don't see the point."

In February, Metro announced that it would be rolling out another 145 video-camera-equipped buses this year. The contract was awarded to Apollo Video Technology of Woodinville.

The cost of the digital video recording system called Roadrunner is \$7,000 per bus. Jacobsen said most of the money comes from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in the form of federal security grants; Metro kicks in 10 to 20 percent in matching dollars.

Jacobsen said that 131 of those buses are expected to be video-ready this month. An additional 180 are planned for the next couple of years. Of the 145 announced in February, 14 of them will be spares that Metro can swap in or out as needed.

Over the next couple of years Metro plans to have 411 of its fleet of about 1,400 buses equipped with video cameras.

Rodell Notbohm is the owner of Apollo Video Technology. He predicts that in five years every transit bus, school bus and police car will be equipped with video cameras.

That's good news for Notbohm, who said his business, which he started in 2004, is growing 200 percent annually.

On the No. 49 bus route, which runs through Capitol Hill on Broadway from downtown to the University District, each bus can have as many as eight cameras on it - two by the driver, two by each of the back doors, one bolted to the back wall and another optional camera at the front that can monitor behavior outside the bus. Not all of the No. 49 buses have cameras installed.

For the buses that do have cameras, each camera is recording live and the video is saved to a hard drive on the bus. The storage device is called a digital video recorder (DVR). The basic concept for a DVR is the same as a VCR, but instead of recording to a tape, the digital video recorder saves the video to

a hard drive.

Unless the driver chooses to flag certain video footage for storage, the video is recorded over when the hard drive fills up. Depending on the size of the hard drive that could take months, said Notbohm.

If the driver chooses to keep the video, he or she flags it and it's sent to a central server and stored.

"There's really no motivation to do anything with [the video] other than for security purposes," said Notbohm. When he started his business four years ago he said that he anticipated more privacy complaints. But most of the complaints, he said, come from bus drivers rather than passengers.

Passengers feel safer with the cameras there, Notbohm said.

According to Jacobsen and council member Phillips, the only people who have access to the stored videos are Metro security personnel. Access doesn't require a warrant and the video can be used for not only assault investigations but also to challenge personal injury claims made by passengers who say they fell on the bus, as well as for training purposes.

Phillips isn't concerned about privacy issues. He said that he can't imagine anyone sitting around watching people ride the bus. If it does happen, his answer is to "get a life."

Notbohm said: "Really, it's just an instrument of truth." There are a lot of people, he said, that try to defraud Metro with phony personal injury claims. The cameras, he said help reduce expenses.

Phillips said that the program is a success.

"It's a good program and citizens seem to be happier," said the council member.

Phillips is chair of the Capital Budget committee and a member of the Operating Budget, Fiscal Management and Select Issues committee.

He said that passengers were complaining about problems on some of the bus routes.

"You can't ignore those calls for help," said Phillips.

But is it worth the expense?

Metro is planning a fare increase this July. The elderly will see their bus passes go up 63 percent and youth passes will increase by 50 percent. In the press release announcing the increase, operational expenses and rising fuel costs were the reasons.

It's hard to imagine that installing thousands of video cameras

on more than 400 buses will have no noticeable impact on Metro's operational budget as both Phillips and Jones in Sims' office have suggested.

According to Metro they're spending about \$900 a month to service the 100 cameras that are in operation right now.

Cameras break, hard drives crash, software upgrades are inevitable and maintaining the wide area network is certainly not without its share of issues. Whether it's contracted out, or handled internally, this vast system of cameras and digital video recorders rattling down the streets of Seattle will need to be maintained, and it's certainly not going to be free to do so.

Regardless of the cost, there still remains the issue of privacy. While there's no constitutional expectation of privacy in a public place, there's certainly a Big Brother feeling to having seven cameras peering at you while you ride the bus to work or school. And for people who don't own cars, riding the bus may be their only option.

*The reporter for this story, Keith Vance, can be contacted [here](#).*

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