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Contact: Leslie Wolf Branscomb at
lawolf@sandiego.gov or (619) 533-5896

City Attorney Updates Public on Smart Streetlights

Video technology is a public safety “game changer”

City Attorney Mara W. Elliott today highlighted how the City’s Smart Streetlights program has helped the San Diego Police Department investigate nearly 250 crimes committed on San Diego streets.

She spoke outside the Alpha Project homeless bridge shelter where a security guard was murdered the weekend after Christmas, leaving behind a wife and six children. The only witness to his brutal murder was a Smart Streetlight. It helped police identify and arrest the suspects now charged with his murder.

“To date, police have used streetlight recordings to help solve nearly 250 crimes, including murders, sexual assaults, kidnappings, carjackings, arsons, and hate crimes,” City Attorney Mara W. Elliott said. **“Yet now a small group is telling a bunch of lies about Smart Streetlights to try to shut them down. I may be the only elected official in San Diego who isn’t intimidated by their scare tactics, but I’m not going to turn my back on a powerful crime-solving tool that removes murderers and rapists from our streets.”**

Correcting the disinformation campaign about Smart Streetlights, Elliott made the following points:

- The cameras don’t read license plates or recognize faces.
- They are fixed cameras that observe streets, sidewalks, and other public places where there is no expectation of privacy.
- All camera footage is deleted within five days, unless it is part of a Police Department investigation.
- The city has exclusive ownership of the data created on the streetlights. It’s not for sale and it will not be sold.

The Police Department reports that Smart Streetlights have been a “game changer” in terms of investigating crimes.

Serious crimes investigated with the help of streetlight footage include 44 homicides or attempted homicides, 46 assaults, and 36 robberies and burglaries. Here are a few examples:

- The January 19, 2020, fatal hit-and-run of Jason Gordon in Sherman Heights. The victim was struck by a car while crossing Market Street around 2 a.m. Streetlight footage showed the incident and allowed police to identify the vehicle. Additional security cameras also captured the driver as he stopped for Mexican food shortly afterward.
- A January 7, 2020, string of arson fires in East Village. Investigators were able to retrieve images from Smart Streetlights that helped identify the individual responsible for setting the four trash can fires on Market Street.
- The December 28, 2019, murder of Ernest Buchanan, a security guard at an Alpha Project bridge shelter in East Village. He was shot and killed by unknown assailants. Footage from a nearby streetlight helped police identify two suspects, who were arrested within 10 days.
- The November 6, 2019, shooting death of an employee of a Church's Chicken restaurant in Otay Mesa. A photo of the getaway car was circulated to media and law enforcement and led to the arrest of the man charged with murdering Maribel Ibañez.
- A November 6, 2018, sexual assault in downtown San Diego. Police used Smart Streetlight video to develop leads on the suspect following the violent assault. That led to his arrest and conviction. He is serving a 10-year sentence.
- The October 10, 2018, murder of an East Village store owner by robbers wearing disguises. Streetlight video tracked one of the killers for 10 blocks as he coolly walked away from the scene, at which point he removed his mask, allowing for identification.

Police have reviewed streetlight footage in 79 traffic incidents, such as fatal and serious injury collisions, felony driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and felony hit-and-runs, which often occurred at night with no witnesses. Some examples:

- In a serious injury collision between a motorcycle and vehicle, streetlight footage showed the vehicle driver ran a red light and was at fault. The vehicle driver claimed a San Diego Fire Department truck had forced them to run the red light. The streetlight video debunked this claim.
- After a collision in which a motorist ran a red light, he ran away from the scene and claimed he was a passenger. Streetlight footage showed he was the driver and he was successfully prosecuted.
- A motorist ran a red light, hitting another vehicle and killing the passenger. The motorist at fault blamed the other driver, who lost his wife in the accident. Streetlight footage proved the driver whose wife was killed was not at fault.

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