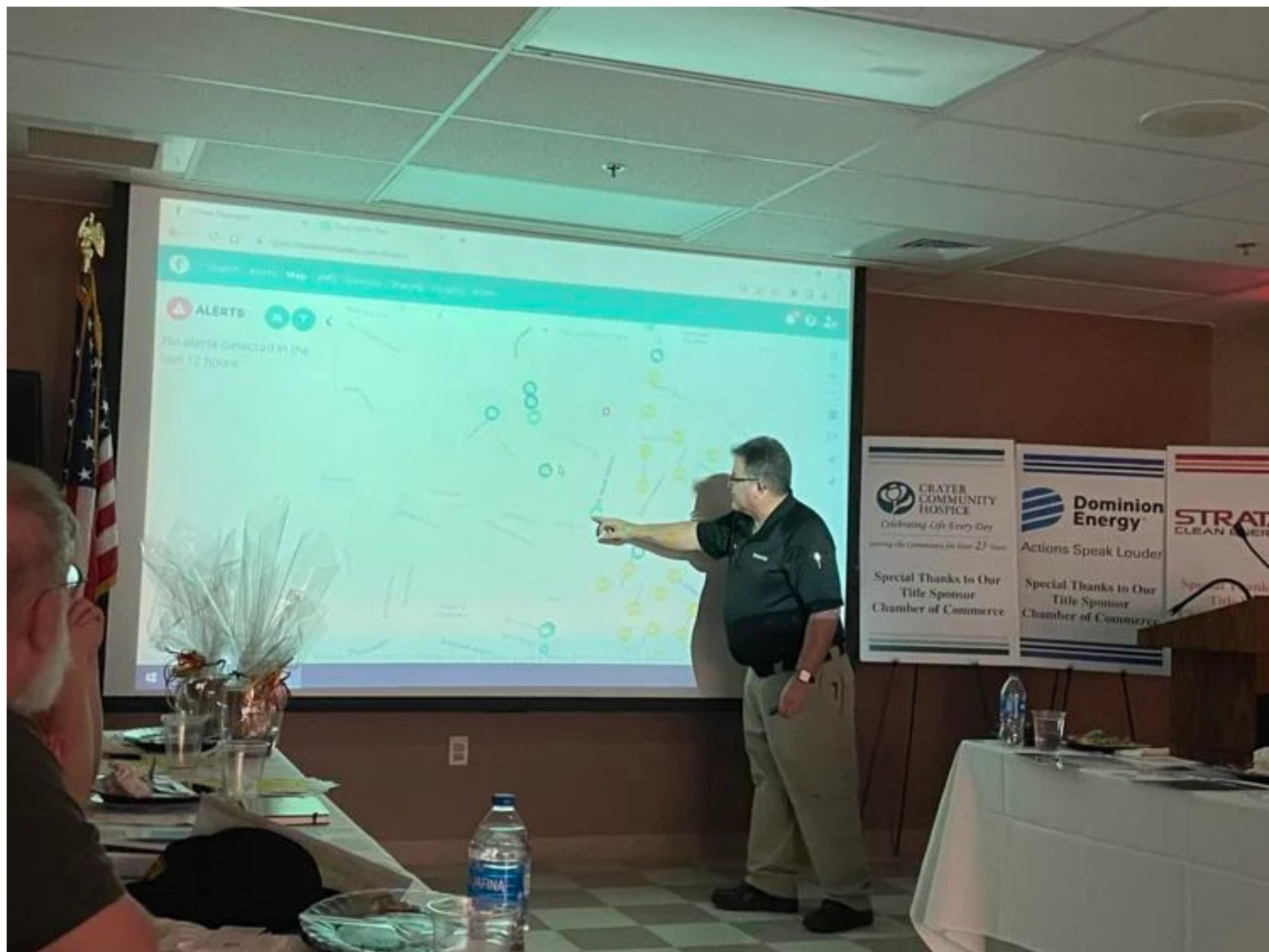


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FEATURED

New "Emporia Safe" camera sharing program launched

By Kayla Hardersen, Staff Writer
Oct 27, 2023



EPD Chief Ricky Pinksaw shows a map of the Flock Condor video systems and LPRs in Emporia during the Emporia-Greenville Chamber of Commerce luncheon on Oct. 19.

Kayla Hardersen/Independent-Messenger

The Emporia Police Department is asking local businesses and residents who own security cameras to register their devices so officers can access their feeds if a crime is committed nearby.

Emporia P.D. Chief Ricky Pinksaw addressed the Emporia-Greenville Chamber of Commerce on Thursday to explain the new "Emporia Safe" initiative, which relies heavily on new technologies acquired by the department through a number of grants as well as community support.

Pinksaw is asking any businesses or individuals in the area who have cameras facing the parking lot or their storefront to register their camera with the police department. Dispatchers will be able to access a business' cameras as needed if a crime is committed in the area.

"Trust me, I don't wanna get into your breakroom," Pinksaw assured the room.

Rather, registering a camera allows the department to mirror the feed and view it as necessary. The cameras will not be constantly monitored. The feeds will link with the department's additional security monitoring system through Flock Safety.

Most recently, the Emporia P.D. was able to purchase Flock's Condor video system. Condor cameras sit on skinny black poles and are currently placed at major intersections throughout the city, Pinksaw said. The cameras operate a constant live stream which is monitored by dispatchers and can be accessed by officers at any time.

"When I started as a young patrol officer in Culpeper, it was heartbreaking to go to scenes and there was no evidence," Pinksaw said. "You had no information. You were taking what you saw — damaged car or a damaged window — whatever it could have been, and there was no witnesses. And you're taking all this information and you knew, deep in your head, you said, 'All I'm doing is taking a report. There's no way I'll be able to solve this case.' And that's frustrating."

Now, Pinksaw said, that has all changed. The Emporia P.D. was able to purchase three one-year subscriptions of license plate reader (LPR) cameras in 2022 using a \$10,000 Byrne Justice Assistance grant. The cameras are automatic and work by taking a photo of every car that passes by. Officers receive an alert directly to their phones and dispatchers receive one on their monitors if the car is identified as being stolen or otherwise involved in a crime. Another grant from the Virginia State Police funded additional cameras and a second year's subscription.

Emporia P.D. then expanded their Flock security system with gunshot detectors. Currently, the police have a quarter square mile coverage from Halifax Street to Monroe Street. The device sits on a black pole and alerts the department at the sound of gunshots. Pinksaw said the system is critical because gunshots often go unreported in the city. The technology has the ability to pinpoint the location of the gunshot within 90 feet and sends an alert within 45 seconds.

The city received a total of \$750,000 in grant funding to assist with the development of its police technology.

Pinksaw could not have been more grateful to Delegate Otto Wachsmann (R-75) for his role in ensuring Emporia kept the grant money to be able to upgrade their monitoring systems. Emporia was designated as one of twelve localities in the commonwealth to receive grant funding under Attorney General Jason Miyares' "Operation Ceasefire" to reduce violent crime. Governor Glenn Youngkin also announced "Operation Bold Blue Line" in Oct. 2022 which aims to fund recruiting efforts as well as new training and technology in local law enforcement agencies around Virginia. Emporia was reportedly first on the chopping block when the governor received backlash over most of the areas set to benefit from the grant funding were south of Richmond. Pinksaw thanked Del. Wachsmann for fighting to keep Emporia on the list.

"It's a game changer," Pinksaw said. "I'm excited about that because this business excites me and when we can solve crimes and we can bring justice for the victims, it excites me."

The Flock security system is just one step of the Emporia P.D.'s mission to create a real time crime center (RTCC), Pinksaw said. The department is one of the few in Virginia which contracts with Flock Safety for their entire monitoring system.

"There's a gunshot at Home Depot," Pinksaw said, refusing to use a real business Emporia so as not to jinx anything. "What's going to happen with us is we're going to integrate all of the systems together. So, we had a blue Chevrolet, and there was a gunshot — all of these devices are going to start clicking in, and this is what's amazing to me — you can actually start tracking them."

If a robbery or gunshot is called in to the police from the fictitious Home Depot and the caller has identified a blue Chevrolet leaving the scene, Pinksaw's goal is to have someone sitting at an RTCC to search for blue Chevrolets in Flock's system, which will trigger the LPR while gunshot detectors help determine the search area.

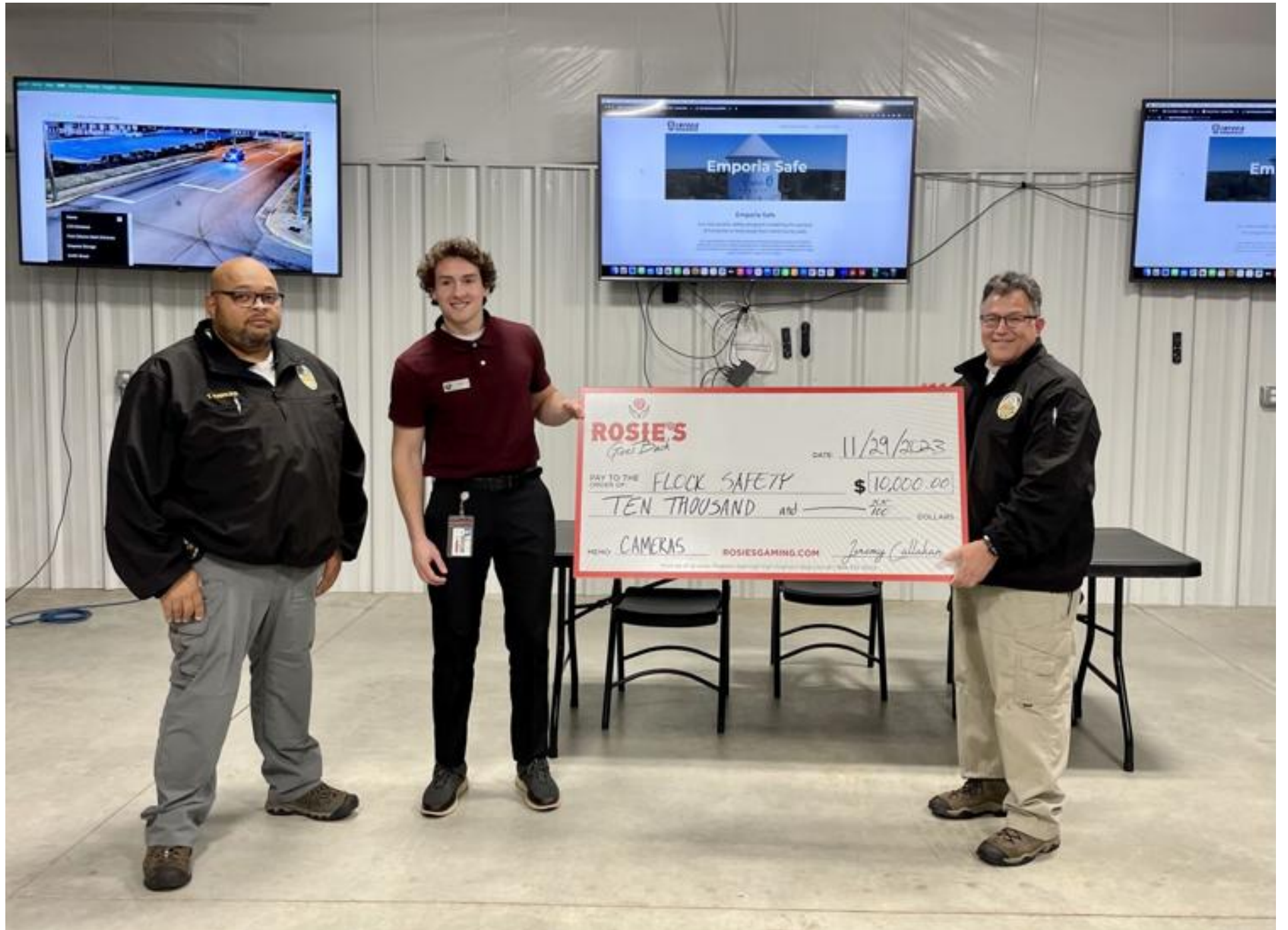
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FEATURED

EPD and Flock Safety address uncertainties at town forum

By Kayla Hardersen, Staff Writer

Dec 6, 2023



Major Troy Hawkins (left) and Chief Ricky Pinksaw (right) accepted a \$10,000 check from the Rosie's Gives Back program to purchase additional Condor live video cameras.

Kayla Hardersen/Independent-Messenger

Flock Safety representative Shane MacGregor joined Emporia Police Chief Ricky Pinksaw and Major Troy Hawkins to present the "Emporia Safe" camera sharing program to approximately 15 residents and local business owners on Wednesday evening.

Flock Safety is a technology platform with the goal of eliminating crime and helping to keep communities safe. The company was founded in 2017 originally to work with Homeowners Associations but has since grown to partner with law enforcement agencies around the United States. The company's license plate readers, gunshot detectors and cameras are all tied to Flock OS — the company's "ecosystem," Macgregor called it. The Flock OS software allows police departments to receive real-time alerts and monitor all of their Flock hardware from a single website.

“Just know that the chief and his team, in conjunction with this technology,” MacGregor said. “Emporia is a lot safer than it was two or three years ago. I can guarantee that.”

MacGregor joined Flock’s team in July 2022 as the territory sales manager in Virginia. At the time, Flock had six clients in the Commonwealth. MacGregor estimates that number to be about 70 by the end of the year. Flock Safety was ranked the seventh fastest-growing company in North America on the Deloitte Technology Fast 500™ list in 2022.

The Emporia P.D. has received \$750,000 in grants to purchase Falcon LPR cameras, Raven audio detection devices and Condor live video cameras. Rather than buying the technology, Flock leases their hardware for a one-year subscription, during which time the company will provide maintenance and upgrades as the system improves. The Emporia P.D. plans to work with the city to appropriate funding for renewing the leases when grant funding is unavailable, according to Pinksaw.

Pinksaw and MacGregor encouraged local business owners and residents to attend their presentation on Nov. 29 to assuage any concerns they may have about the department’s new “Emporia Safe” camera sharing program. They encouraged business owners who have cameras pointed at their parking lots or front doors to integrate their systems with Flock so that if a crime is committed, officers can access a business’ feed directly. The cameras will not be monitored 24/7, the pair assured attendees.

“Emporia Safe is not a surveillance system and it is not a security system,” MacGregor said. “Chief does not have staff that is gonna look at your live feed cameras constantly. Chief does not have the resources to do that.”

At this point, individual households are unable to integrate their doorbell cameras. They are instead encouraged to register their camera with the department. If a crime is committed, officers can check where cameras have been registered in the area and visit those homes directly, rather than going door-to-door checking for people that have security systems.

Emporia’s first investment in Flock’s technology was in 2022 with their license plate reader cameras. The Falcon records every car that drives by its camera and stores the data for thirty days. Officers with even the vaguest of descriptions of a car involved in a crime can search for vehicles by inputting the make, model, color, or any other defining characteristic such as bumper stickers or rust in Flock OS. Flock estimates a 70% reduction in crime in cities that utilize their LPR cameras.

Since then, the department has acquired Raven gunshot detectors which cover a quarter square mile from Halifax to Monroe Street. Delegate Otto Wachsmann (R-75) asked if the devices were able to distinguish fireworks from gunshots. MacGregor replied that the detectors are 90% accurate — a number much higher than it was when the device was launched earlier this year. Flock’s gunshot detectors use machine learning to continuously improve their accuracy. Engineers at Flock fed the system 25,000 examples of fireworks so the device would learn the difference and it is getting more accurate every day, MacGregor said.

The Emporia P.D.’s most recent acquisition is Flock’s Condor live video camera, currently positioned at the intersection of Main Street and Brunswick Avenue.

All three devices record their data to Flock's operating system, which can be accessed by all Emporia police personnel. Real-time alerts are sent to officers' phones and Chief Pinksaw is working on the assembly of a Real Time Crime Center (RTRC) at the department. He has secured wall and desktop monitors and plans to assign two dispatchers to work the RTRC in case of an incident. Dispatchers will be able to monitor all of Flock's alerts and search the system for wanted vehicles, establish a potential route and direct officers in pursuit.

Pinksaw showed what he and other police personnel are able to view when they look at Flock's system. They have access to a map which shows the locations of every camera, audio detector and police vehicle. Officers' body-worn cameras are also integrated into Flock's system.

"We put this map up here, it's about full transparency," Pinksaw said. "We got nothing to hide. There's nothing we would wanna hide from anybody."

Major Hawkins said that the technology will allow officers to be fully briefed before they enter a situation. Frenzied individuals on 911 calls may not provide every detail to dispatchers, but the RTRC will allow them to monitor any unfolding events and relay necessary information to responding officers.

"The officer can see what he's getting into before he arrives at the scene," Hawkins said. "There's nothing more embarrassing than an officer pulling in as the suspect's leaving, and they don't know."

One concern brought up by attendees at Wednesday's event was the use of artificial intelligence. MacGregor said that privacy is a major concern for the company — Flock will never use facial recognition and are hesitant to begin using artificial intelligence.

"We want to be very careful about privacy and the ethics side," MacGregor said. "You can go in and search by vehicle type. You're never gonna be able to go in and search by human characteristics."

MacGregor added that all footage collected automatically deletes after 30 days, in accordance with Virginia's privacy laws.

Another question arose about whether residents would receive speeding tickets in the mail as a result of being caught on camera.

"We are worried about missing persons, stolen vehicles, warrants, anything NC-OXY, which is an FBI list," MacGregor said. "Whether you run a red light or are going 20 over, Flock does not care."

Rosie's Gaming Emporium donated \$10,000 to the Emporia P.D. to purchase additional Flock hardware. The donation was made as a part of the company's charitable Rosie's Gives Back program, which gives \$25,000 every quarter to local organizations and nonprofits.

Businesses or residents who want to integrate or register their cameras with the police department can do so at refer.flocksafety.com/emporia-safe.

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FEATURED

'I can't answer that:' Greenville Correctional leader addresses inmate safety

By Kayla Hardersen, Staff Writer

Dec 13, 2023



Greenville Correctional Center Assistant Warden Frank Roach.

Kayla Hardersen/Independent-Messenger

A leader at Greenville Correctional Center fielded questions about the prison's security and recent deaths during a spontaneous interview on Wednesday.

Members of the media were invited to Greenville Correctional Center on Dec. 5 to take photos and videos of a mock hostage situation during a drill between the Virginia Department of Corrections, Virginia State Police, Greenville County Sheriff's Office and Greenville County Fire and Emergency Services. Shortly before the event was set to begin, Assistant Warden Frank Roach told reporters that they would not be able to record the event as VSP did not want some of their tactics revealed.

Roach instead agreed to an interview during which he said that the drill was an important step towards inter-agency cooperation while preparing for emergency situations.

Roach was asked if Greenville Correctional is facing a staff shortage.

"I can't really answer that question," Roach said. "But I'll say whether you're fully-staffed or short-staffed, there's always challenges."

Reporters' questions about recent deaths and drugs discovered at the facility were met with interruptions by VADOC spokespeople, who requested that the conversation remain focused on the drill.

The prison's most recent lockdown revealed 21 homemade weapons, heroin, cocaine, THC and other drugs, according to a VADOC press release.

When asked if prison staff were responsible for bringing drugs inside the prison, Roach again deflected.

"I can't answer that question," Roach said. "This is me personally, and not the DOC, an individual is going to do what they want to do."

A spokesperson for the Department of Corrections cut in. "Once again, we can't talk about that right now."

Greenville Correctional Center has been the subject of controversy for months following a slew of suspected overdoses and drug problems. Six inmates have died since July. This year alone the prison has also dealt with an escaped convict, multiple fires and the discovery of a dead corrections officer in her car in the prison's parking lot. Greenville Correctional Center is one of VADOC's largest facilities, with an inmate population of 2,424 as of August 2023.