

Eyes on the public

In 2009, the Los Angeles Times published an article about Lancaster's surveillance cameras. The article, which raised privacy questions, suggested that Lancaster was perhaps the most closely watched city in the nation.

Fast forward three years and a different Lancaster is vying for those honors. The city of Lancaster, Calif., has established a new aerial surveillance system in which a small camera-carrying plane, flown by a pilot, circles the city as a video in-air patrol. The plane is scheduled to fly between two and 10 hours a day, but the times would vary.

The idea is to catch criminals in the act of committing crimes or to deter them from doing so. The plane's cameras pinpoint the location where crimes are being committed and give officers a live feed.

But what about the times when no crimes are being committed? Lancaster, Calif., officials say the plane will focus on "problem areas." Those decisions will rest with police officials. That has raised privacy concerns as to what areas are under surveillance and who, ultimately, will make those decisions.

Similar privacy concerns have been raised about Lancaster, Pa.'s cameras. The city's 158 cameras are focused on streets throughout the city. Although they are manned by a citizens rather than police, they have been used to identify criminals and alert police to situations where tensions are high.

Last year, images from the cameras offered evidence that resulted in 138 arrests and 49 citations. An additional 40 people pleaded guilty to crimes, according to Lancaster Safety Coalition officials.

Balancing safety and privacy concerns is a growing issue in society. Officials should, in all cases, act cautiously and with restraint. Detailed logs of what was seen and by whom should be kept.

The Lancaster (Pa.) Safety Coalition is now seeking \$100,000 in private donations to maintain the cameras. In our eyes, it is a reasonable request, and certainly far less expensive than buying and manning an airplane.