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Thursday, Jun. 05, 2008

Richland launches new crime-alert technology

By Paula Horton, Herald staff writer

Technology-savvy residents in Richland -- and even those who only have basic e-mailing capabilities -- now can receive electronic alerts about crime in town.

Richland police launched a new program Wednesday that allows individuals and businesses to sign up for the information about criminal activity or other emergencies.

"It opens the channel of communication from us to our citizens," Capt. Mike Cobb said. "It also has an ability for them to give tips to us."

The department signed up with CitizenObserver.com to reach out to the community about crime and crime prevention.

Officials got the money approved for the program last year and have been working on it since January to get it launched.

It will cost \$3,500 for one year for three current employees -- Cobb, Sgt. Dan Phillips and Crime Prevention Officer Erica Tungevik -- to have access to the system.

Information can be put online as often as needed, but Tungevik said she plans to post an alert at least once a week.

"It's going to vary depending on what's going on," she said.

Cobb added that it's driven "100 percent based on crime."

The first alert was posted online this week to warn residents about a trend of home burglaries where intruders have simply walked through unlocked back doors while people were home.

Three such burglaries were reported in the past two weeks. Brief details about the burglaries are included in the alert, along with a reminder to keep homes and vehicles locked.

Residents who sign up to receive information from the police department would have had an e-mail or text message on their cell phone telling them that a new alert had been posted online.

Then all they have to do is click on the CitizenObserver link from the police department's website and find out what's going on.

If the system had been activated Tuesday, Cobb could have posted information about the SWAT team being called out to a home at Benham and Jadwin searching for a kidnapping suspect.

People living in the area then could have easily gone online to find out why the large armored vehicle was driving down their street.

"It gives us another very fluid and flexible way for our public to get information," the police captain said. "It's an effective and economical tool to keep our public informed."

If officers get reports about counterfeit money or fraud targeting businesses, they can put out special business alerts online.

People also can submit confidential tips to the police department online.

"People in our city are very attuned to technology," Cobb said. "We're trying to meet our public expectation by staying a little bit more on the leading edge of technology."

Logging in is simple. Go to the city of Richland's website at www.ci.richland.wa.us and click on the link for police services.

About halfway down the page is the information and link for CitizenObserver. Just type in the Richland ZIP code and look for the instructions to "sign up for alerts."

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