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Cameras, Sensors To Line Railway

Reactions Mixed On Whether Plan Will Protect D.C.

By Eric M. Weiss
Washington Post Staff Writer
Saturday, July 16, 2005; Page B01

Hundreds of surveillance cameras and sensors to detect intruders will be installed along a freight rail line that snakes through the District and within three blocks of the U.S. Capitol.

The \$9.8 million pilot project, funded by the Department of Homeland Security, is the most detailed information to surface about plans to secure the rail line. This year, District leaders tried to ban hazardous shipments on the line because of fears of a terrorist attack.

The project, announced by the two private companies who were awarded the contract, was confirmed yesterday by Homeland Security officials.

The plan was devised as a result of vulnerability studies conducted by federal safety officials on 42 miles of freight track stretching from Lorton to Silver Spring, according to the federal agency.

The security system will be installed on the 7 1/2 -mile stretch of CSX Transportation Inc. track that runs between Reagan National Airport and the Benning Road rail yard in Northeast Washington, according to the companies involved in the work. A Homeland Security spokeswoman said she could not confirm which portion of track was covered by the pilot project.



Security plans for tracks that pass near the U.S. Capitol, shared by commuter and freight trains, were described as "a step in the right direction." (By James A. Parcell -- The Washington Post)

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The system will include more than 300 cameras, including ones able to detect movement, according to the federal agency. Authorized trains, vehicles and personnel will be given radio frequency identification cards that will identify them as "friendlies" to the cameras and sensors.

If a vehicle or individual not recognized by the system approaches the buffer zone, an alarm will sound and an alert will be sent to a District command center, according to the federal department. The rail line also will be equipped with virtual "gates" where trains will be scanned by nuclear, biological and chemical sensors before being allowed to continue into the city, officials said.

"This is using the best and latest technologies to make the track safer and, as a result, make people safer," Homeland Security spokeswoman Michelle Petrovich said. Construction will begin "shortly" and take 18 months to complete, she said.

D.C. Council member Kathy Patterson (D-Ward 3), a sponsor of legislation that banned hazardous rail shipments through the city, yesterday dismissed the security project as "high-tech toys for boys" and said it would increase the danger to city residents by "giving the impression that you are doing something when you are not."

She said the system of cameras and sensors would do nothing to prevent a terrorist from using a high-powered rifle to blow up a rail car loaded with poisonous gas. "It spends \$10 million and doesn't alleviate the risk," Patterson said.

Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) said yesterday that the project appeared to be "a step in the right direction."

CSX officials voluntarily have rerouted shipments of hazardous cargo from the rail line near the Capitol because of safety concerns and have not said when those might resume.

D.C. Council members argued that the voluntary rerouting was not enough and passed the ban, which was to have taken effect April 20. But a federal appeals court ruling stopped implementation of the law pending a review of the legal issues involved. The railroad contends that the D.C. ban illegally covers areas governed by federal law.

Williams and council members said the ban they approved was necessary because the nation's capital is a prime terrorist target and because they concluded that the federal government had abdicated its responsibility to protect District residents. City officials cited studies showing that the explosion of a rail car filled with chlorine gas near the Mall could, under certain conditions, kill tens of thousands of people.

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The two companies that won the Homeland Security contract are Florida-based Duos Technologies Inc., which said in its announcement that it specializes in "intelligent video" projects in airports, railroads and hospitals, and Epsilon Systems Solutions Inc., which has created surveillance systems at chemical plants for the federal agency.

Staff writer Spencer S. Hsu contributed to this report.

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