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Colorado Springs to install 'dirty bomb' sensors citywide

By Nicholas Riccardi
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COLORADO SPRINGS -- Once content to worry about traffic flow and stoplight coordination, John Merritt lately has been pondering darker matters.

For example: What if a terrorist scavenged enough radioactive material from workaday medical devices in a hospital and fastened a chip to a newspaper box in a popular park, silently emitting enough radiation to kill anyone who spent 10 minutes in its vicinity?

In this quiet bedroom community surrounded by five military bases, including NORAD, which monitors North American airspace, city officials believe that they have to worry about terrorism as much as some of the nation's biggest cities. That's why Merritt, the city's senior traffic engineer, has become the point person in an effort to install a monitoring system that could detect a "dirty bomb" or another similar radiological terrorist attack.

The network is in the early stages, with the city having obtained four sensors for a test run before it applies for grant money to buy the rest. The goal is for sensors affixed to the city's traffic lights to sound an alarm at a central headquarters if they detect a sizable amount of radiation. Traffic-light cameras automatically will photograph the landscape in all four directions when radiation is registered by a specific sensor.

Many U.S. ports have devices that can detect radioactive emissions, and some public transportation systems--such as the Washington subway--have contemplated installing them. Tunnels into New York also are equipped with devices that screen for radiation.

But Colorado Springs appears to be the first city in the nation to prepare a citywide system. Ottawa, Canada, is the only other North American city that has a similar setup, according to the company that makes the products Colorado Springs is using.

To Merritt, it makes sense that this city of 360,000 people is the first U.S. city to go on permanent lookout for dirty bombs.

"We've got every military base in the world here," Merritt said. "We're on the list of top 70 potential terrorist targets."

Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism expert and director of the RAND Corp.'s Washington office, also said it's

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logical for the city to launch a detection system. "In the post-9/11 world, it's hard to say what doesn't make sense," he said. "The proclivity for everyone is to err on the side of caution."

Homeland Security officials have spoken about setting up a nationwide network of fixed and mobile radiation detectors, and numerous companies have taken advantage of the post-Sept. 11 fears of a dirty bomb to design an array of devices that could spot chemical or radioactive terrorist attacks. One company has even perfected cell phones that can double as radiation detectors.

Some skeptics believe that fears of dirty bombs--or so-called silent bombs that don't explode but quietly project lethal radiation--are overblown.

"Anything that emits radiation is going to be detected" eventually by existing safety measures, said Julian Palmore, a mathematics professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who has written about what he believes are overreactions to radioactive terrorist threats. As far as a city setting up detectors, he added, "I think that's ridiculous."

But Hoffman, the RAND terrorism expert, disagreed. He said that documents recovered from Al Qaeda camps show that Osama bin Laden has contemplated using a dirty bomb and that a relatively inexpensive detection system makes sense. Colorado Springs bought its sensors for \$30,000 each, and Mobile Detect, the Ottawa-based company that manufactures the detectors used by Colorado Springs, said it would cost \$1 million to \$2 million to set up a citywide system.

"There's an inherent deterrent measure," he said. "By publicizing that Colorado Springs has this measure, it decreases the chance that terrorists will attack Colorado Springs."

Instead, Hoffman said, terrorists might seek softer targets elsewhere. "That's why, if you have a burglar alarm, you put a sign on your lawn. 'Hey, go burglarize my neighbor's house.'"

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