

Project54 a hit - UNH-developed cruiser technology picked up across U.S.

By Michael McCord

DURHAM - Project54 has gone national.

The voice-activated police cruiser technology developed by University of New Hampshire researchers and tested by New Hampshire police is now being installed by law enforcement agencies in other states.

The Maryland State Police has started to install Project54 in 90 cars and eventually may convert its entire patrol fleet of 1,000 vehicles.

William Lenharth, an associate research professor at UNH, said the state-of-the-art technology gives police voice-activated control of devices such as light bars, sirens, radios, records checks, radar guns, video cameras, license scanners and GPS units.

Project54 - which Lenharth said was named after the old television show "Car 54, Where Are You?" - has been installed in about 300 New Hampshire police vehicles for the State Police and 40 cities and towns.

"By the end of the year, we expect more than 600 (vehicles) in the state will be installed with Project54 systems," Lenharth said.

Project54 has proven to be popular with police departments across the country.

"We looked at other systems, but they all had inherent dangers to the police officers. For example, if the computer crashed, the officer couldn't use the radio," said Lt. Chet Smith of the Maryland State Police. "We think that Project54 has the best working system out there of the ones that we've seen."

The Carlsbad (Calif.) Police Department already has Project54 in 20 of its cruisers and plans to have it in all 50 of its squad cars this spring. Capt. Dale Stockton of the Carlsbad police said that Project54's hands-free control is allowing his department to equip its patrol cars with modern office technology that doesn't distract drivers.

In addition to Maryland and California, Lenharth said that Project54 systems are being deployed in Minnesota and Colorado and by the Boston Police Department.

The project began, Lenharth explained, in 1996, when he was encouraged to help develop a more efficient mobile data system for the State Police.

After securing its first federal research grants in 1999, Project54's research and deployment kicked into high gear.

"The heart of the project was to build an integrated system that could be voice-activated," he said. Lights and sirens were the first tasks controlled by voice activation, and those were followed by global positioning, radio, and record-searching capability.

"Our goal is to control all the functions in the car with a Palm Pilot," Lenharth said.

UNH said that Sen. Judd Gregg, R-N.H., who secured initial funding for Project54 in 1999, recently secured an additional \$5.75 million for 2005. The money is allocated for three areas - \$3 million for further development and testing, \$2 million for deployment with local police departments and \$750,000 for records interoperability at the N.H. Division of Motor Vehicles.

Project54 has secured a total of \$27.5 million in federal funding since its inception.

Besides development, testing and deployment of the system in state and local police cars, the funding has paid for data server computers, records management software and dispatching upgrades for the N.H. Department of Safety to integrate police cruisers into statewide data networks and help automate the handling of law enforcement information.

The next major step for Project54, Lenharth said, will be to integrate the systems with fire and emergency service departments.

Lenharth said the entire project has been for "the public good." UNH sells the system software to police departments for a flat fee of \$500 that allows departments to deploy the system in as many vehicles as it wants.

"It's really a nominal fee," Lenharth said. The important thing is to enhance public safety, which Lenharth said has been noticed by insurance companies who cover police and fire departments.

"We've been approached by insurance groups who see (Project54) as a way to improve officer safety," he said, which could lead to reduced premiums for city and state departments.