

Smile: the city's taking your picture

Sharper images on the way for every streetscape in Hamilton

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The detailed brickwork on your home. The sign in your front window.

In some cases, even you on your front porch, though with your face blurred out.

All are part of a Hamilton city hall bank of digital photographs of local streets that will be upgraded to an even finer detail and panoramic scope come spring.

It's aimed at greater efficiency for municipal operations, primarily in public works.

"The clarity allows ... even manholes, you can see the names of the utility lids, you can see the writing on signs in the field, so that type of clarity can really help," said John Murray, manager of asset management services at the city.

The city recently entered into a \$115,000 agreement with iLOOKABOUT that allows it to upgrade its old information, which will continue to be accessible to all city employees through its Intranet.

The company, based in London, Ont., will use roughly four of its vehicles with mounted, professional digital cameras to snap 180-degree panoramic shots every five metres down each street in the city.

The technology has been used by many municipalities as well as businesses such as real estate offices and insurance boards for years.

Since 2004, Hamilton has had access to stills made by another company that allow a front and side-to-side look at points along every street in the city.

But instead of still shots at three angles, there are five, said Gord McGuire, manager of surveys and tech services at the city. The new ones are clearer, too.

Murray and McGuire say looking at detailed stills of a street helps staff avoid unnecessary and sometimes lengthy trips to a site, which also reduces vehicle emissions.

For example, McGuire said, if a resident calls the city to complain about the location of a pole near their driveway, "rather than meet on site, we can talk on the phone, pull up the photography ... and we can address the concern or at least have a good understanding right off the bat."

By tracking use of its current photo system, the city determined this system saves it roughly \$200,000 annually, says Murray.

iLOOKABOUT president and CEO Jeff Young said 98.5 per cent of its photos don't have people in them, and faces and licence plates are blurred out to safeguard identity.

"We've had significant discussions with the Ontario privacy commissioner's office and they say what we do is fine because we're collecting images from a public road," says Young.

And city employees are already bound by privacy policies.

Murray said the city's municipal freedom of information and protection of privacy office ensures such systems comply with privacy laws.

University of Toronto professor of surveillance David Phillips said privacy requirements can be satisfied by blurring personal information like faces, but he thinks the issue raised by such technology is more fundamental.

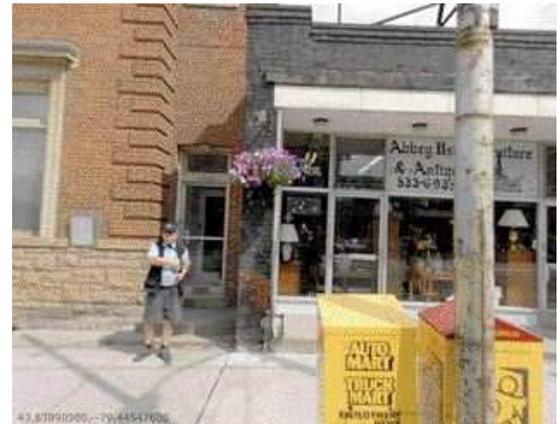
"It's really a question of how well and how easily people know about your neighbourhood. (The city will say) 'it's our street, we can do whatever we want with it' but the fact that it's going down to this level of knowledge just changes the balance of power and the relationship between the citizen and the state," said Phillips.

He wonders whether such photos could not be easily handed over to police authorities with a subpoena if they were thought to be a source of evidence in a crime.

"No matter what policy they have around it that information will always be available to police."



Photos Courtesy of Ilookabout Streetscape Map Service



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