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City Would Photograph Every Vehicle Entering Manhattan and Sniff Out Radioactivity

By [AL BAKER](#)

The Police Department is working on a plan to track every vehicle that enters Manhattan to strengthen the city's guard against a potential terror attack, the department's chief spokesman said.

The proposal — called Operation Sentinel — relies on integrating layers of technologies, some that are still being perfected. It calls for photographing, and scanning the license plates of, cars and trucks at all bridges and tunnels and using sensors to detect the presence of radioactivity.

Data on each vehicle — its time-stamped image, license plate imprint and radiological signature — would be sent to a command center in Lower Manhattan, where it would be indexed and stored for at least a month as part of a broad security plan that emphasizes protecting the city's financial district, the spokesman, Paul J. Browne, said. If it were not linked to a suspicious vehicle or a law enforcement investigation, it would be eliminated, he said.

“Our main objective would be to, through intelligence, find out about a plot before it ever got to a stage where a nuclear device or a dirty bomb was coming our way,” Mr. Browne said. “This provides for our defense after a plot has already been launched and a device is on its way.”

The proposal is one element of a 36-page plan for security, mainly focused on the site of ground zero, that Police Commissioner [Raymond W. Kelly](#) and his counterterrorism bureau commanders have shared with the director of the [Port Authority of New York and New Jersey](#).

For months, Mr. Kelly and his command staff have been urging the creation of a London-style surveillance system for the financial district that relies on license plate readers, movable roadblocks and 3,000 public and private security cameras below Canal Street, all linked to a coordination center at 55 Broadway. Known as the Lower Manhattan Security Initiative, the center is to open in September.

At the same time, a federal Securing the Cities program is going forward: The police are creating links with law enforcement agencies within a 50-mile radius around the city. That plan includes outfitting officers with radiation detectors to stop a nuclear or radiological threat as far from the target as possible.

Operation Sentinel would combine strategies from the security initiative and Securing the Cities and

use them at choke points into Manhattan.

Mr. Browne could not say when the program would be completed, though the Lower Manhattan initiative is expected to be in place by 2010. "This is just a planning document," he said of the proposal. "It's a vision of how it will work if all the components come together."

He said he could not predict what the city's law enforcement leaders would do after the Bloomberg administration leaves at the end of 2009. But he said that Mr. Kelly was concerned that a more robust security system be in place before the World Trade Center area opens for business again.

"The importance of protecting the nation's financial center will remain," Mr. Browne said. "And the ability to protect an urban center from a dirty bomb or a nuclear device will also remain."

Since early 2007, the police have been using technology to read license plates and to check the information against databases, including one for stolen cars. Similarly, they are using closed-circuit TV and radiation-detection equipment in various counterterrorism operations.

For instance, the department owns portable radiation vehicles — known as TRACS, for Tactical Radiation Acquisition and Characterization System — that can detect radiological agents like cesium or cobalt and differentiate between dangerous ones and ones used in products like smoke detectors or medical devices.

Operation Sentinel would synchronize the three forms of technology — photographs, license plate readers and radiation detectors — in one system.

But there are hurdles. The costs of the project, and its feasibility, have not been fully determined. The Lower Manhattan Security Initiative is a \$90 million program; the Securing the Cities program is being paid for with federal money, including \$40 million earmarked in the 2008 fiscal year 2008 and \$30 million expected the following year. Also, tracking many thousands of vehicles and people every day raises alarm with civil libertarians.

However, Steven Emerson, executive director of the Investigative Project on Terrorism in Washington, a nonprofit research organization that investigates terror groups worldwide, said that the tactics would not invade people's privacy and that they were critically important, given plots to attack Lower Manhattan.

"It is one tool of ensuring that if there is somebody on a terrorist watch list or someone driving erratically, or if a pattern develops that raises suspicions, it gives them an opportunity to investigate further and — if need be — track down the drivers or the passengers," he said. "The bottom line is they can't frisk everybody coming into Manhattan; they cannot wand everyone, as they do at airports. This is a passive collection of data that is not as personally invasive as what they do at airports."

Operation Sentinel calls for the cameras, license plate readers and radiological scanners to be deployed at seven vehicle crossings: the Brooklyn-Battery, Holland, Lincoln and Queens-Midtown Tunnels, and the George Washington, Henry Hudson and Triborough Bridges.

Mr. Browne said the plan was to include every crossing, including the smaller bridges connecting the Bronx and Upper Manhattan like the Willis Avenue and Macombs Dam Bridges.

A major challenge is to develop technology to discern the radiological signature of vehicles across several lanes at a toll plaza, where many enter at once, and to have the ability to align that data with the correct closed-circuit image and license plate.

“That is the principal challenge they are looking to resolve,” Mr. Browne said.

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