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# Making security a top priority

## Gage County Courthouse sees added measures

By **SCOTT KOPERSKI**

DAILY SUN NEWS EDITOR

Despite large red signs that greet visitors to the third floor of the Gage County Courthouse, finding prohibited items is a regular occurrence since additional security measures have been added.

The third floor is where you'll find both the District and County courtrooms and offices, but reaching them requires passing a metal detector, as well as Gage County deputies on the lookout for banned items.

Recent courthouse additions to assist deputies include mirrors to see down hallways and a new monitor that can stream any camera in the courthouse. The cameras aren't new, but previously had to be viewed from the basement rather than the courtroom checkpoint.

One of the most noticeable additions is Bryan Davidson, the Sheriff's Department's full-time special service deputy who began with the department in March.

April marked the first time deputies kept track of traffic entering the third floor, and Davidson said the results were surprising.

"There were 996 people attending court, not counting attorneys, social workers or anybody like that," Davidson said. "It surprised me just how many people come up through here. There were a lot of cell phones and 42 knives or stabbing tools that we removed."

Compete statistics from the department revealed the courts see an average of 57 patrons each day. In addition to the 42 knives or instruments that could be used to stab, there were 246 instances where visitors attempted to bring cell phones, which signs dictate are not allowed, into the court area.

Other items the department found last month included a bullet, mace and a handcuff key.

Davidson said when deputies uncover such items, they ask the person in possession to take the item off the property, have someone else do it for them, or surrender the item at the metal detector.

"Obviously, we don't want any weapons

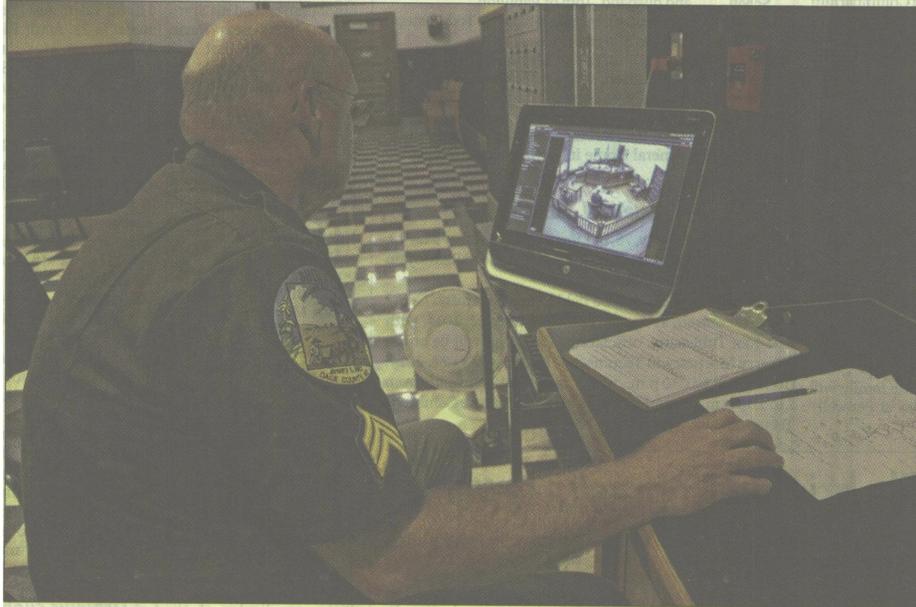
or anything that can be used as a weapon to be entering the court," Davidson said.

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Special service deputies Gary Wiebe, left, and Bryan Davidson use recently installed mirrors to see down hallways and around corners from the security checkpoint of the Gage County Courthouse

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PHOTOS BY SCOTT KOPERSKI/DAILY SUN STAFF

Special service deputy Bryan Davidson watches the Gage County Courtroom from a monitor in the hall. Newly installed surveillance equipment lets deputies monitor the courthouse from the security checkpoint on the third floor. A total of 996 court patrons were screened last month.

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“If somebody has something that we perceive could be used as a weapon, we ask them to remove that,” he said. “The cell phones are becoming the big issues. The judges do not want a cell phone in their courtroom. That’s difficult for people, because cell phones have become like wearing a watch, you just carry it around with you.”

The Courthouse typically has 1-3 deputies working security, depending on which courts are in session.

This year marks a decade of work for special service deputy Gary Wiebe at the courthouse.

He said the added staff and security measures have made a noticeable difference in the job.

“I started here in 2004, and we didn’t have this security equipment,” he said. “Not just in the big cities, but things started happening in the small cities and it’s so much better to be proactive than reactive. It’s come a long way. We now have a monitor where we can watch

every floor from several different spots throughout the courthouse.”

Security advances at the courthouse aren’t expected to slow down anytime soon.

Another idea that’s been discussed during law enforcement committee meetings of the Gage County Board of Supervisors is limiting the courthouse to a single entrance point. With one way in or out of the building, the scanning equipment would be located at this entrance to blanket the entire courthouse with the same level of security found on the third floor.

One idea becoming a reality will be a used baggage screening machine from Lancaster County that will scan items entering the courthouse as a means of continued protection for everyone who enters the court area.

“Sometimes, we don’t know the reason why somebody is in a courtroom,” Davidson said. “They may be there because they’re a

victim. They may be just an innocent person we don’t want to see get hurt because somebody else is displaying bad behavior. That’s why we are very careful about screening before people go into court.

“We’re not here only to protect the judges. We’re here to protect everyone, including the inmates. They are shackled and unable to defend themselves and there could be an angry person who attends court. It’s our responsibility to make sure that they get in and out of this courtroom safely.”

Bryan added such a baggage-scanning machine would have cost the department at least \$19,000 if purchased new, but the used scanner was bought for \$200.

Both courtrooms are also going to be fitted with video arraignment equipment, allowing inmates to appear via a monitor rather than having to be physically transported by deputies across the street from the jail.

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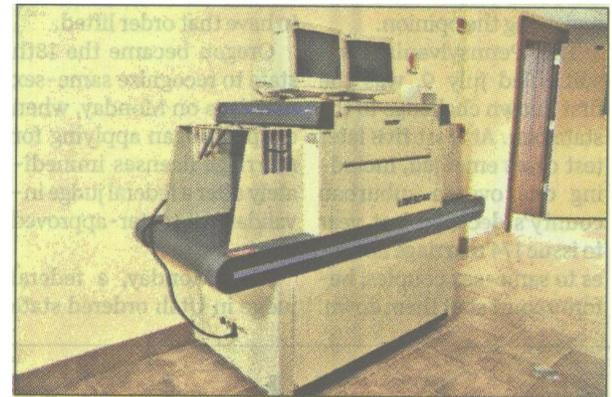


PHOTO BY SCOTT KOPERSKI/DAILY SUN STAFF

The Gage County Sheriff’s Department purchased a used baggage screening machine from Lancaster County that will scan items entering the courthouse. The machine would have cost \$19,000 if purchased new, but the used scanner was bought for \$200.