

Ridgeland, Madison police investigate video arraignment

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THE MADISON AND Ridgeland police departments are both planning to get video arraignment technology, which is now helping the Madison County Sheriff's Department with security as well as saving manpower and money.

When the city departments get video capabilities, they'll save even more money that would be spent transporting prisoners to justice court in Canton.

"Yes we are reviewing the system now. We are moving toward joining their system. We do not have a time frame yet," said Madison Police Chief Gene Waldrop about CountyLync, the first video arraignment technology to be implemented in Mississippi.

Ridgeland Police Chief Jimmy Houston said his department planned to buy into the system too.

"We hope to purchase it as soon as we can get the quotes and make sure it works in our current system," Houston said.

Madison County Jail Administrator Maj. Chuck McNeal said the main benefit of the video capabilities, implemented about a month ago, is security.

"The only time we're vulnerable is when the inmate leaves the facility. So staying here [and doing the arraignment via video], we don't have to worry as much about escapes," McNeal said.

"It's not necessarily about fuel costs for us because the justice court is right next to us."

Currently, the department is only using the technology for justice court arraignments, in which bond amounts are set for suspects. But the system could be expanded in the future, he said.

"The cost [savings] for us would be manpower. And for us right now, the biggest factor is security, more than the savings we get."

He said startup costs for CountyLync were approximately \$5,000 to \$5,500.

WITH THE NEW system, the justice court judge has a laptop and webcam, and arraignments happen with the inmate, deputies and attorneys in the detention center with another computer and webcam. The public is able to view the proceedings on a large monitor in the courthouse, McNeal said.

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When the city departments in south Madison County get the technology, they'll save money not traveling to Canton as much, he said.

“You can imagine Ridgeland PD transporting eight prisoners a day back and forth to take them in front of the judge so the judge can say, ‘Your bond is ...’ ”

Officials said startup costs for the cities to implement a system like CountyLync could be less than \$2,000.

THE HINDS COUNTY Sheriff’s Office is in talks with different companies to purchase a video arraignment system, Chief Deputy Chris Picou said.

CountyLync is from a company called Pileum, with offices in Knoxville, Tenn., and Jackson.

“That is something that we are working on. We’ve gone through some presentations from different companies. I know the court system is on board,” Picou said.

“The county had to upgrade its Internet lines. That’s being finished up now, so I’m sure we’ll start on it soon.

“You’ve got to remember, the jail and all the court buildings, those fall under the direction of the [county] supervisors, so whenever they say, ‘Let’s go,’ we’re there. It would be the board of supervisors who got the system,” he said.

McNeal said the Madison County department didn’t have to get supervisors’ approval to buy CountyLync.

“I don’t know how it works in other counties.”

Picou said Hinds County would benefit immensely from video arraignment capabilities, “particularly with our jail being in Raymond [and our department located in downtown Jackson]. Transportation costs and security measures that have to be in place, it’s quite a burden on the department.”

He said he drives 12,000 to 13,000 miles to and from court each month. If a county van gets 12 miles to the gallon, with gas costs at roughly \$3.50 a gallon, that’s \$42,000 a year in gas.