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Monday, August 6, 2007

Car 54 takes to the water: Marine Patrol to get test boat from UNH

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DURHAM — The New Hampshire Marine Patrol will test new technology in Portsmouth Harbor this year that will give officers voice control of lights, radar and sirens, as well as a streamlined navigation system that will plot paths around underwater hazards.

The University of New Hampshire's Project 54, a team of researchers that designed a similar system for police cruisers, will outfit a test boat with the technology in the next few weeks, according to William Lenharth, a research professor at the school.

Lenharth said that Marine Patrol officers will wear a headset that will allow them to communicate with other officers and feed voice commands into a computer. The technology will provide hands-free control over the electrical functions of the boat, as well as the ability to run background checks, get directions, and coordinate with other boats in the area.

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Project 54 was started in 1999 to design voice-control systems for police vehicles. The team received a \$4-million-dollar federal grant and has installed systems in more than 1,000 cruisers in New Hampshire and other states that provide many of the same voice functions.

According to Lenharth, one difficult part of modifying the technology for a marine environment was compensating for background noise. He hopes that using headsets will cut out the rumble of engines and crash of ocean waves. Waterproofing the equipment has also been a concern for the team, but designers encountered the problem in the past while installing devices on motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles.



Nathan Purmort, a research engineer at the University of New Hampshire demonstrates voice-activated commands incorporated into Project 54. The system, already used by patrol cars in the area, will be installed in a Marine Patrol boat in Portsmouth Harbor. (Aaron Leclerc/Staff photographer)

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implement the Project 54 system in a marine environment, but added that the UNH team is aware of the challenges it faces and has been working for over a year to fine-tune the device.

One new feature of the Marine Patrol system is a tool that would allow officers to orally input the latitude and longitude of a location and then receive directions to navigate there that are calculated by a set of GPS devices. The system would eliminate the need for officers to consult maps and work out courses manually.



Matthew Lape, a junior at the University of New Hampshire, works on a component of Project 54 at the schools' engineering building. The system, already used by patrol cars in the area, will be installed in a Marine Patrol boat in Portsmouth Harbor, giving officers advanced navigation features and voice control over its electrical functions. (Aaron Leclerc/Staff photographer)

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"We're anxious to get the equipment installed and field test it," said Marine Patrol Capt. Mark Gallagher. Gallagher said that it may be more difficult to

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"Under normal circumstances, it's not too difficult to handle the boat and be able to tune or adjust the electronics as necessary, but in difficult circumstances, like the middle of a rescue, it certainly would be helpful to have voice command over the boat," he said.

The system will be tested and modified until next spring, when Lenharth believes it will be installed in the two remaining boats in the harbor. Ultimately, Project 54 units may be implemented in 17-20 Marine Patrol boats across the state. Lenharth hopes that the device will find its way into U.S. Coast Guard craft as well.