BOCA RATON — From police headquarters, official eyes can be on 151 different public locations at once and an effort has begun to expand that vision into the private corners of the city.

Police say they have started approaching businesses about wiring their security camera systems into the city's so that those private camera views can be seen in real-time, not just after a crime has been committed. But the capability could raise some issues about an individual's right to privacy.

It's already proven useful, however.

Earlier this year, as preparations for the October presidential debate at Lynn University kicked into high gear, the city installed software that allowed three different video systems to be wired into the city's platform: police, parks and traffic cameras.

Having a system that can easily get wired with others only makes sense, considering how many businesses have high-quality video surveillance, said James Burke director of support services for the Boca Raton police.

In two years, the city expects to have 1,000 police cameras throughout the city, but its view could reach much further with private help, he said.

"Every bank has a video system," he said. "Imagine there was a robbery in progress. Wouldn't it be nice if the officer had the ability to pull up in his car and see what's going on inside the building?"

Part of the idea behind relocating city police operations to a new facility planned for 6500 N. Congress Ave. is to be able to build a wall of video views. The new building is expected to be completed during the next fiscal year.

Of course, this new view from private cameras would only be with the consent of the video cameras' owners, and it wouldn't be constant surveillance, police say.

"It wouldn't be us looking at their cameras 24/7," Burke said. "It would be more like, we get a call telling us, 'Hey someone is breaking in.' "

But the expansion of these views could raise questions that the legal system hasn't yet decided, said Mark Tunick, a Florida Atlantic University professor.

"You can't expect privacy walking down the street," said Tunick, who is a political science professor at the university's Wilkes Honors College. "With a lot of cameras at different locations, they could be used to follow someone. That data (from the different cameras) could be aggregated and that raises greater privacy concerns."
He said that the 1983 Supreme Court case United States v. Knotts determined that a beeper used to track someone was not unreasonable search and seizure, but that tracking was for less than two hours.

"They didn't address if someone was tracked for days," he said.

Building the current surveillance system started four years ago and police estimate it will be another two years before their system is fully operational. Since they began, though, video has become a standard tool for crime-fighting, one of the first questions that police ask when something happens.

"Most times, people expect to have a video of the crime, because people know how pervasive it is," said Boca Assistant Police Chief Edgar Morley.

Police estimate they've spent a few hundred thousand on installing their system and have received some federal grants to develop it.

Partnering with city home owner associations to get gate cameras wired into the city police system is definitely part of the expansion plan, Burke said. He said they can't offer advice on particular vendors, but they can suggest equipment that will make private systems more compatible.

It sounds good to John Siegel, who has been on the board of his HOA Woodfield Hunt.

"We have cameras," he said, of Woodfield Hunt's front entrance. "I wouldn't want them being able to look in our houses, but if they could do surveillance of the front entrances that would be great.

"With their budgets tight, they probably aren't doing as much patrolling," he added.