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Tampa's Gasparilla Festival: A Communications Success

TAMPA CELEBRATES AT THE GASPARILLA PIRATE FESTIVAL

It's a busy Saturday afternoon in January with several hundred thousand pedestrians marching along Tampa's Bayshore Boulevard, a major traffic artery in the downtown area. Traffic is at a complete standstill. Now imagine that 700 crazed "pirates" come sailing in on the Hillsborough River.

Tampa's annual Gasparilla Pirate Festival kicked off on January 27, 2006, with several hundred thousand people in attendance. The Gasparilla Festival honors the legendary pirate, Jose Gaspar, who allegedly sailed the waters of West Florida during the late 18th century. The festival is one of Florida's largest public events of the year, which gets under way with a 165 foot steel vessel accompanied by hundreds of small boats invading Tampa Bay. The ship carries 700 pirates, with flags flying and cannons blazing. Every year the city "surrenders" and the pirates take to the streets, while hundreds of decked-out partygoers wearing fashionable costumes toss their beads into the crowd.

Tampa has organized and conducted the Gasparilla Festival, which is one of the largest public festivals in the U.S., each year since 1904. The festival is held every year in January, starting with the parade which lasts for one day, and the festivities last for over a month. This year's parade included more than 90 floats, 14 bands, and 30 Krewes (local social clubs).

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES MONITOR THE PIRATES

This year when the "Jose Gasparilla" pirate ship docked near the Tampa Convention Center, the Tampa Police Department and counterparts from Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties used a variety of technologies including secure software applications and radio

Tampa's Gasparilla Festival kicks off.

frequency communications to monitor the hundreds of boats and ships in the Hillsborough River and the thousands of parade-goers along Bayshore Boulevard. Police officials from Tampa, Hillsborough County, and Pinellas County worked from the Tampa PD Joint Operations Center (JOC) in the Convention Center, from mobile tactical vans, and from airborne surveillance platforms.

While residents and out of town guests attended Gasparilla to revel in the entertainment, nearly 1,000 local law enforcement and public safety personnel conducted a massive, full-scale exercise to prepare for and prevent an emergency from occurring. Tampa and its neighboring counties of Hillsborough and Pinellas begin their preparations for the safety and security of the event six months in advance. This year DHS contributed to Tampa's planning and execution of the event for the first time.

TAMPA BAY REGIONAL DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

The Tampa Bay Regional Demonstration Project, initiated in May 2005, is an ongoing joint effort between members of the Tampa Bay Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Office of Grants and Training (G&T). The goal of this project is to advance the Tampa Bay UASI Homeland Security Strategy and Preparedness goals by demonstrating and evaluating technologies identified as necessary for inter-agency and regional command center coordination, voice and data communication, and information sharing. The project provides a suite of technologies for seamless integration into the region's existing portfolio of tools. Additonally, the project will help to develop a technology transfer template of potential applications for Federal, State, and local agencies nationwide.

The project received support from other DHS offices, in additon to G&T, including the Wireless Management Office (WMO), the Science and Technology Directorate (S&T), as well as the Washington DC-based Naval Research Laboratory (NRL). Tampa authorities successfully merged communication technologies to monitor the entire festival from aerial feeds and through routine police communications.

As part of the FY 2005 UASI program, Tampa has been working closely DHS to prevent, protect against, respond to, and recover from acts of terrorism.

Hillsborough County Sheriff's deputies patrol the streets.

Tampa's relationship with DHS predates the Tampa Bay Regional Demonstration Project. Beginning in 2003, the Tampa UASI Working Group started collaborating with G&T's Interoperable Communications Technical Assistance Program (ICTAP) to improve its interoperable communications capabilities for public safety and first responders. With funding from both the city and DHS, the Urban Area Working Group broadened the program to include other technologies, including aerial electronic mapping technology, electronic incident management, studies of data center procedures, as well as risk assessment of public infrastructure throughout the area.

At the local level, Tampa, St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Pinellas, and Hillsborough counties, as well as the Port of Tampa have all been involved in this effort.

The Tampa Bay Regional Demonstration Project includes the Regional Data Center Study, the Wireless Interoperable Communications and Mobility Tactical Van Operations, the Deployment of Site Profiler™ Risk Assessment and Management Software, and the Safety Net Project.

Regional Data Center Study

This Regional Data Center Study evaluated the information technology infrastructure and continuity of operations planning of seven data centers in the Tampa region. These data centers process sensitive and vital law enforcement and public safety information on a daily basis. Tampa officials hailed the study as one of the most comprehensive studies to-date. It provided a thorough validation and evaluation of these centers' continuity of operations plans, and a clear roadmap for addressing network connectivity among them. This project was completed in January 2006 by the Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command (SPAWAR) under ICTAP direction.

Wireless Interoperable Communications and Mobility and Tactical Van Operations

The Wireless Interoperable Communications and Mobility and Tactical Van Operations project, which was funded by DHS, was a collaboration between the Tampa Police Department and the Tampa Urban Area Working Group. They drafted a plan laying out the requirements for a mobile command center that will serve as an integrated command post for special events and other uses. It is intended to incorporate IP networks, video conferencing, data and voice communications, and satellite connectivity. The NRL in Washington, D.C., has played a major role in supporting Tampa's technology efforts and even transported one of its InfraLynx mobile communications vans to the region to support Gasparilla.

NRL's effort to profile the InfraLynx mobile communications van, in concert with Hillsborough County and Tampa Police Department Incident Command Posts, provided additional means to monitor communications across the event.

Deployment of Site Profiler™ Risk Assessment and Management Software

Through assistance of a G&T–specific grant, the Tampa Police Department took the lead in acquiring and deploying Site Profiler™ commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) software.

The software allows public safety and law enforcement officials at all levels of government to gather data and identify risks to infrastructure. This allows users to more effectively distribute information about resources throughout the city. The application includes information on weapons, tactics, and terrorist organizations. It also allows the user to assess the risk and vulnerability of an agency's plans and policies. The police worked with Digital Sandbox in deploying this risk vulnerability assessment tool. Ten agencies used Site Profiler™ during Gasparilla. This project is expected to be fully operational in spring 2006.

Safety Net Project

The Safety Net project is a secure Web-based portal for information sharing among authorized users at Federal, State, and local levels in the Tampa region. Safety Net, which is sponsored by the DHS Science

A mobile tactical van lines a Tampa city street.

and Technology Directorate and Homeland Security Advanced Research Projects Agency (HSAPRA), will use Internet technologies and standards for information sharing. It will not aggregate existing data, but rather it will serve as a portal to already populated databases and will conform to current data sharing agreements throughout the State.

The Safety Net Project will:

- Provide a secure, virtual system for the sharing of law enforcement and public safety information by authorized users

- Identify critical data to be stored by participating agencies

- Develop technologies that will enable participating agencies to control and maintain their own systems.

- Develop processes and techniques to ensure that data is current and accurate

Following the festival weekend, Tampa's Mayor Pam Iorio told the local press and DHS officials that it was the most successful Gasparilla event to date, and commended the technology efforts, which helped Tampa better anticipate critical events and deploy law enforcement and public safety personnel effectively. The

end of the festival on January 29 marked the successful completion of Phase I of the Tampa Bay Regional Demonstration Project.

The Jose Gaspar sails the seas.