

## **Little dots look for big results *Tiny technology targets small-time crooks***

It's no bigger than the tip of a fingernail, inconspicuous as a dust particle, and it can help homeowners fight back against burglars. At least that's what residents of Belgravia are hoping by signing up for a pilot program that uses technology so tiny most thieves won't notice it.

The program uses microdots, one-millimetre-sized devices that can be discreetly attached to any household item, from vehicles and bicycles to jewelry and electronics. Despite diminutive dimensions, the dots are etched with a special PIN number unique to each property owner. If any item goes missing and later turns up, the number can be retrieved by police for help in their investigation.

"Each dot is about the size of a pinhead and has information on it that cross-tie through a database system to the homeowner," said Pat Cowman, president of MicroDotDNA Technology. "The system makes it simple for law enforcement to identify material if they come across it." Cowman said the technology has been used successfully in recent years by industrial clients such as PCL Construction and Epcor, which have been plagued with thefts of copper wire, construction tools and other materials.

The Belgravia project is the first attempt at using the system to protect a residential community. "The more aware we are and active we are, the less likely we are to be a victim," said Richard Law, founder of Belgravia Watch, a resident-led effort to reduce crime.

Participation in the program is voluntary. Belgravia residents who pay a \$40 startup fee will receive enough microdots to mark 75 to 100 items with a common PIN number. The digits are saved in the company's computer database, which can also be used by homeowners to upload product serial numbers. That information can later come in handy for police. For example, if an item shows up in a pawnshop, investigators can use a magnifying tool to read the PIN number from the microdots. They can then access the company's database to look up the item's true owner.

Currently, many victims of theft never get their goods returned because police can't be 100-per-cent sure who owns them. The microdots provide that proof of ownership.

The system may also help catch thieves. The presence of microdots on any pawnshop item tells police the object is likely stolen. They can then question the shop owner about the seller's identity. "These (criminals) know it's up to the police to prove that the item actually belongs to another person," Cowman said. "If you can't positively identify the property, then it's very hard for police to get a criminal conviction."

Besides the marking technology, the other major component of the program is an advertising campaign, community liaison Const. Aimee Maione said. Big, reflective signs are to be placed throughout Belgravia, warning thieves they might be stealing more than they intended.

"The signs basically say that if you come into the community with the intent of taking something, you might be stealing something that's marked and the likelihood of you getting caught goes up," Law said.

Belgravia is not known as a heavy crime area. According to police statistics, 34 property crimes have been reported in the neighborhood this year — one of the lower totals in the city. Law believes the real number is higher. Many minor break-ins don't get reported because homeowners believe they will never get their stuff back, he said.

"Belgravia is overall pretty low in terms of crime, but we want to make it even less," Law said. "Will this program stop them? I don't know, but it's a start. This will be a test to see how big of a deterrent it is."

Besides the \$40 startup fee, homeowners must also pay an annual fee of \$25, or \$15 if they sign up for three years. Law said a few dozen households have already joined.