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Gwinnett Place security upped for holidays

DULUTH — Contrary to some perceptions, criminal activity in the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District — once the commercial nucleus of the county — dropped by nearly 25 percent between 2007 and 2009, according to police data. But CID leaders aren't taking any chances.

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Staff Photo: Jonathan Phillips
Members of the Specialized Intelligence and Security Operations, from left, Jamie Haywood, John Bradley, Chad Crenshaw, Nick Sabino and Patrick Kovack will start extra patrols around Gwinnett County starting next week with the beginning of the holiday shopping season around the corner. The ramped up patrols are in cooperation with the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District.

DULUTH — Contrary to some perceptions, criminal activity in the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District — once the commercial nucleus of the county — dropped by nearly 25 percent between 2007 and 2009, according to police data.

But CID leaders aren't taking any chances.

In anticipation of the holiday shopping season, Gwinnett Place CID officials have hired a private security firm to patrol the area for six weeks, beginning Monday, to complement Gwinnett police patrols and the CID's own watch program. It marks the first time CID officials have used private security.

Two marked cars from Specialized Intelligence and Security will patrol the area on weekends, and one during the week, in addition to unmarked patrols. CID officials paid \$15,625, or about \$25 per hour, for the service.

Joe Allen, Gwinnett Place CID executive director, said the initiative is an ongoing attempt to buff the reputation of an area once considered Gwinnett's premiere shopping district.

"We're trying to remain proactive and fight the perception (of high crime)," Allen said. "Even though crime continues to go down in the area, sometimes that reality has not gotten to John Q. Citizen, the shopper."

The security firm was hired a couple of years ago to patrol the Evermore CID near Snellville and Gwinnett Village CID in Norcross, said Investigator Mike Burgess, an SIS owner.

"We're another set of ears and eyes out there to help (police)," Burgess said.

A Gwinnett police analysis shows a double-digit decrease in Gwinnett Place CID crime in the last two years. Robberies fell 50 percent, auto break-ins 21 percent and commercial burglaries 12 percent, the data show.

Allen attributes the crime drop to strong partnerships with Gwinnett police, daily patrols by a CID staffer and efforts to beautify the area with landscaping and trash removal that "make the area look clean, safe and inviting," he said.

Nearby Gwinnett Village CID reported a similar drop in crime rates when officials hired off-duty police to patrol the area in 2008. Allen said off-duty police patrols haven't been used because many businesses hire private security.

Private security personnel will patrol the entire CID footprint — bordered by Club Drive to the east, Steve Reynolds Boulevard (south) and Old Norcross Road (north and west) — consisting of 10 miles of roadway and 238 commercial properties with roughly 1,000 businesses.

Allen said the volume of visitors to the area remains heavy.

About 8 million shoppers visited Gwinnett Place Mall last year. More than 55,000 vehicles per day traverse Pleasant Hill Road at Interstate 85, he said.

Allen said the initial contract with SIS expires Jan. 1. His board will evaluate the results and community input and decide whether to continue patrols in 2011.