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FEATURED

Gwinnett Place CID increases security for holiday shopping season

By Erika Wells

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Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District Director of Operations Glenn Wisdom, left, and Joe Allen with Paradigm patrolling the major shopping area in Duluth. (Staff Photo: Erika Wells)

Officials with the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District in Duluth are reminding shoppers and visitors to be alert and take the proper precautions when holiday shopping this year.

“You have got to be aware of your surroundings and always watch for who’s behind you,” said Ken Cox, a CID patrol officer and director of operations for Paradigm Security Services. “If something feels wrong, follow that little feeling. Every time I’ve done it, I’ve always been right.”

The district is a group of business leaders who maintain and enhance Gwinnett’s central business district, which covers a total of 10 miles around Gwinnett Place Mall. The district is within the area that stretches north to Old Norcross Road, south along Pleasant Hill to Club Drive and west to Steve Reynolds Boulevard.

Created in 2005, the CID works with hundreds of business owners and the local government on economic development, improving traffic flow, walkability, streetscaping and other projects.

Each year, millions of people visit the area, which includes retail, office space, shopping, dining and hospitality.

One of the CID’s efforts to create a sense of community includes ensuring safety, especially during the holiday shopping season. During this busy time of the year, the risk of criminal activity increases.

But the CID has beefed up security with contracted private security professionals patrolling extended hours. The uniformed patrol officers with the Norcross-based Paradigm Security Services collaborate year-round with Gwinnett police and offer motorist and commuter assistance.

Many people aren’t familiar with the CID or its patrol officers, who regularly escort employees to their cars after hours, Cox said.

“We consider ourselves goodwill ambassadors for the CID,” he said. “We try to interact

with everyone so they know we are here to help.”

The retiree served eight years in the military and 14 years as a police officer. He has done everything from hooking up jumper cables to pushing stalled vehicles from the roadway. Residents may have seen him directing traffic until police arrived following major accidents.

The patrol officers looks for code enforcement violations such as illegal signage and litter, said Joe Allen, the district’s executive director. In the last decade, officers have removed more than 10,000 signs and in the last year, more than 30 tons of trash, Allen said.

The officers are held accountable through a smartphone-based system. At certain intervals of their shift, officers must scan checkpoints, which are strategically placed behind buildings and other crime targets.

Something as simple as making sure a streetlight is working can prevent illegal activity, Allen said.

“It’s a quick and easy way to deter crime,” he said. “We let people know we’re taking care of the properties ... That’s why there isn’t graffiti in the area.”



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Shoppers should avoid poorly lighted, secluded areas, Cox said. Also, shoppers should park close to retailers and keep car doors locked and valuables out of sight. They should avoid being the last person to leave a store at night.

Whenever shoppers feel like they are in danger, they should make as much noise as possible, he said. The victim should scream or blow a whistle. If a handgun or other weapon isn't available, he suggested using car keys to jab the attacker and going limp to become dead weight during an attempted kidnapping.

"In this case, you have to protect yourself; you have to fight violence with violence," Cox said.

If approached by panhandlers, shoppers should avoid eye contact or giving them money as a safety precaution.

"I understand people want to be kind," Cox said, "but you never know what (panhandlers) may do. Many are suffering from mental illness. ... If they become a problem, businesses will contact the CID and police to have them banned from the property."

Cox welcomed residents to get to know area patrol officers and regularly speak with them.

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