



Gwinnett Mall business area adds private security

By Andria Simmons
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Patrick Kovack scans the grocery store parking lot warily, alert for any sign of abandoned cars, distressed motorists or shoplifters looking to make a quick getaway.

As a contracted security officer for the business community surrounding Gwinnett Place Mall, he is part ambassador and part watchdog. The business owners are paying for private security guards like him for the first time this year through their self-taxing district, the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District. And they want the uniformed presence to send a message to shoppers: Their time and money can be safely spent here.

"Visibility is a huge deterrent for crime," said Kovack, who is also a military police sergeant in the Army National Guard. "A lot of times in my experience it's been younger people causing trouble. If you tell them you can't be doing this here, generally they tell their friends."

For years, business leaders around the mall have collaborated with county police to step up patrols at Christmastime. Some stores also hire their own off-duty police officers or private security guards.

Bringing in guards from Norcross-based Specialized Intelligence and Security to roam the entire area augments those efforts, said Joe Allen, the executive director of the Gwinnett Place CID. The CID is paying \$15,000, or about \$25 an hour, for the service. They hope it will curtail a nagging misconception that the area is crime-ridden.

Four homicides within six months in 2008 overshadowed an overall drop in crime in the Gwinnett Place area.

In fact, commercial burglaries are down 12 percent, automobile break-ins are down 21 percent, and robberies are down 50 percent since 2007. The area saw a 24 percent decrease in overall criminal activity between 2007 and 2009, according to police statistics provided by the CID.

"Now and then you do hear some issues about the perception of crime," Allen said. "The statistics do not bear that out."

The mall was Gwinnett County's main retail hub when it opened in 1984. In the past decade, however, shoppers were drawn to the newer Discover Mills and Mall of Georgia. Other outdoor shopping destinations, such as the Forum in Norcross and the Avenue Webb Ginn near Snellville, also snatched away customers.

Kovack and his cohorts at the Norcross-based Specialized Intelligence and Security have logged 1,500 miles on their vehicles since they began patrolling the area Nov. 22. They will continue roaming the shopping strips between the hours of 10 a.m. and 10 p.m. from now until Jan. 1. The CID is also considering extending the private security patrols into next year if all goes well.

Ericka Jackson, a 35-year-old Snellville woman who shops at the mall, said the area could use it.

"You'll see a few [cops] that are just circling the area, but I don't think it's enough," Jackson said. "Because there's just a whole bunch of teenagers there. Maybe I'm being anti-teen, but they are unsupervised and it does make you feel uncomfortable."

Several other business districts in Gwinnett, including the Evermore CID along U.S. 78 in Snellville and the Gwinnett Village CID along Jimmy Carter Boulevard in Norcross, also have hired SIS to beef up security.

But self-taxing business districts around other aging malls in the Atlanta area have not turned to private security, perhaps because those malls -- Cumberland, North Point and Perimeter in particular -- are in higher socioeconomic areas, Allen said.

Malaika Rivers is the executive director of the Atlanta area's oldest self-taxing business district, the Cumberland CID, around Cumberland Mall. She said funds raised for the area are spent on infrastructure enhancements.

"Crime is just not something that's ever been on our radar for whatever reason," Rivers said.

Kovack assisted with one arrest on Black Friday. A female shoplifter tried to speed away from him in a car after leaving a Shoe Land store. But she was forced to halt when her vehicle struck a curb and popped two tires, Kovack said. Mainly, the gregarious guard spends his time contacting local business owners, helping motorists with flat tires and dead batteries, and warning away vagrants or panhandlers.

Heather Weisman, who works at the front desk of Holiday Inn, chatted briefly with Kovack on Thursday afternoon while he made the rounds.

"He comes and visits every day, gets some coffee and talks to me a little while," Weisman said, adding that she has felt safer with the security guards around. "It only takes them 20 seconds to get here when we call."

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