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Surveillance and Crime Prevention at Diamond Heights Village

*A summary of recent crimes in DHV
garages...and the measures that
worked to end them!*

by Terence Groeper, Network Security Engineer.

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During December 2009 and January 2010, the DHV garages were targeted by a small group of thieves, who broke into vehicles *after* appearing in front of “Security Cameras.”

I’ve compiled here a brief summary of known facts about those incidents, of the role our existing cameras played, and of the effective police and homeowner measures that, for now, seem to have ended this “crime wave.” The facts are as accurate as I can make them and the opinions are my own. Your comments are welcome at terence.groeper@gmail.com.

Night of December 28-29, 2009: Two sedans in the “F” garage were broken into and damaged, with blood stains left on one. Little or nothing of value was stolen. Four luxury convertibles in the same garage were left untouched. A bloody jacket was found on top of the recycle bins.

On video from that night, a suspect, wearing that same jacket (not yet bloodied), was clearly recorded passing through the “F” lobby, saw the cameras, and proceeding into the “F” garage.

The association has clear images and a detailed description of the suspect (provided to the police), but has never published those to the residents. The suspect has never been arrested or convicted of this crime. Moreover, the suspect did not try to hide his face or disguise himself...*nor was he “deterred” by seeing the cameras.*

Night of January 4-5, 2010: Two vehicles were broken into and damaged, one parked in the “J” garage (?) and one in the “H” garage...the latter directly in front of the only garage camera we now have!

A GPS device, out of view, was stolen from one vehicle, with unknown losses from the other.

The digital video recorder for our only garage camera, in “H,” had been inspected by the Infocus technician on December 8. He found it had failed and installed a “loaner” replacement unit. On January 5, he and a police officer went to inspect the recordings, but discovered that the replacement unit *had also failed...and failed on December 15, only a week after being installed!*

So, unfortunately, no videos are available of the crime that occurred directly in front our only garage camera. But, no one knew that at the time...and it's safe to say that *the thieves were not deterred*.



Before January 5, 2010: Infocus Videos had been checking all the lobby and one garage cameras every quarter (as they did on December 8), at a labor cost of up to \$1,200 per visit (in addition to any parts/repairs/upgrades). Our existing surveillance equipment has cost us approximately \$70,000, with another \$70,000 proposed.

I have asked the Board to compare our current annual maintenance for existing camera equipment to total annual losses and damages suffered by the residents....yes, it's costing DHVA more just to repair our present surveillance gear than the residents are losing! Yet the Board wants to install lots more cameras...and plans to assess you \$70,000 (\$177/unit) to pay for them....without a membership vote.

After January 5, 2010: Infocus Video is now temporarily and frequently inspecting and testing some of our digital video equipment, at a cost of \$340 per visit. And CIMS' staff is also visually inspecting it at an unknown additional cost for their time.

Please note that this expensive digital video surveillance equipment is *computer-based*, is left unattended in hot storage closets for long periods, and, according to the vendor, has an estimated *lifespan of only 2 to 5 years*. Warranty is 3 years.

January 16, 2010: Two noble and concerned residents, aware of the above crimes, reported two men carrying tools, behaving suspiciously and refusing to stop, in or near “K” building and the Pool. One resident ran after them, but the suspects got into a vehicle on Red Rock Way and hastily departed, without being questioned. *The police were notified promptly.*

Later, January 16, 2010: A different resident owner, exiting the “H” garage observed two individuals in handcuffs sitting on the sidewalk surrounded by several police officers and squad cars. Apparently, the officers were responding to the quick notification by the two residents above.

The resident and one plain clothes officer exchanged information, reporting that, “They [Police] do have reason to believe these MAY be the folks who had been breaking into our cars/garages. I heard the police talking to them about drugs, so it's possible they had prior records. They were not able to arrest the individuals, but believe that IF these are the two that are committing the crimes, they may not come back here again because now they've been spotted, police have their IDs, etc. I was told that the officers had actually spent hours and hours up here in plain clothes waiting for the criminals to strike again.”

My Conclusions: That active homeowner participation and good old-fashioned police work put an end to these crimes...as it has in the past and will in the future. All without the help or burden of near-useless, temperamental and costly video surveillance.

The legendary security expert and personal hero of mine, Bruce Schneier, writes that surveillance video cameras are not cost-effective against crime. He also discusses the loss of privacy at http://www.schneier.com/blog/archives/2009/12/my_reaction_to.html

And especially at <http://www.schneier.com/essay-225.html>

In a scholarly report, the Northern California ALCU echoes those findings at: http://www.aclunc.org/docs/criminal_justice/police_practices/under_the_watchful_eye_the_proliferation_of_video_surveillance_systems_in_california.pdf

All impartial research studies (university-sponsored, scientifically-conducted and peer-reviewed...in San Francisco by UC-Berkeley and in other cities worldwide) unanimously conclude that video surveillance does not deter or convict any better than far less expensive methods....in every location, a similar crime and conviction rate before and after the cameras...folk tales and anecdotal evidence notwithstanding.

For our complex, I have long advocated inexpensive “security that works,” not the “security theater” of cameras and recorders. By that I mean:

- Neighborhood Watch, NERT, and citizen involvement
- Signage reminding drivers not to leave valuables in their cars
- Public notices ask residents to report suspicious behavior
- Tips at <http://sf-police.org/index.aspx?page=1596> (none even mention cameras)
- The active, prompt sharing of information with the Police: 911 or (415) 553-0123.

Those are the things that really work here....not placebo cameras. For more on this topic, please email me or check my research at...

<http://www.DHVA.INFO>

Thank you for reading.

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