

MetroWest shocker: Security cameras are fakes



Security cameras that developer Kevin Azzouz had installed in MetroWest turned out to be empty boxes not connected to any monitoring system. (RICH MCKAY/ORLANDO SENTINEL / September 4, 2009)

By Rich McKay
Sentinel Staff Writer

September 8, 2009

Three years ago, MetroWest was hit with a crime wave.

In the sprawling west Orlando community, there were rapes, daytime armed robberies, assaults and a homicide — the shooting death of a young newlywed just outside his MetroWest apartment.

Residents, business owners and real-estate brokers all turned to the developer of the community's **Veranda Park** town center, **Kevin Azzouz**, asking that something be done.

Azzouz promised an aggressive security plan: about 40 or so "infrared" security cameras along the major thoroughfares to be monitored by security; a sophisticated three-dimensional crime-tracking program to monitor crime; and 16 off-duty police officers to beef up patrols day and night.

Now, residents have discovered:

- All of the security cameras that Azzouz had installed are fakes — empty boxes not connected to any monitoring system and without working parts.
- The crime-tracking computer program was **Google** Earth, an online maps program.
- The number of off-duty officers never reached more than six and has dwindled to just a

couple. Starting Oct. 1, it will be just one officer.

The newly reconstituted MetroWest Masters Association board, which governs the 1,800-acre development with about 12,000 residents, is working to have real security cameras wired directly to Orlando police headquarters, according to new board president Jeremy Hollis.

"We believe that the mock cameras are a liability risk," Hollis said. "We have a security assessment under way, and we have \$120,000 budgeted to purchase and install real cameras."

About a dozen of the 28 neighborhoods within MetroWest have working cameras and private security patrols, but they don't cover main roads and thoroughfares. The fake cameras were installed on utility poles without Orlando Utilities Commission's permission, spokesman Sheridan Becht said.

Orlando police Capt. John O'Grady said that in some settings, fake cameras can be appropriate, such as for decoys for hidden real cameras to catch shoplifters. But outdoor fake cameras can give people a false sense of security, he said.

"Someone might make a decision to go jogging or use an ATM at a certain location because they believe they are monitored by cameras, when that's not really the case," he said.

A spot-check on a half-dozen security cameras in the common areas of MetroWest found they had no apparent wires or electronics connected to them.

Some residents were stunned by the revelation.

T.J. Bates, who lives in a Veranda Park condo, said, "I can't believe it. What else is going to happen around here?"

Azzouz, who remains on the masters association's board, didn't respond to inquiries from the Sentinel. He is involved in numerous lawsuits, foreclosures and bankruptcies involving his half-built \$700 million Veranda Park town center. A lawsuit by some residents alleges that he misspent more than \$2.3 million of association dues money.

The association is now working with Orlando police to get updated crime stats, Hollis said. O'Grady said the new cameras also will be connected to the department's IRIS Program — Innovative Response to Improve Safety.

Other new measures in MetroWest will be a part-time security manager who will work with Orlando police to assess potential crime problems and suggest solutions, Hollis said. And the association no longer uses a Google Earth map to track crime. Instead it will rely on a Police Department program.

Rich McKay can be reached at rmckay@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5470.