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Curbing the Mall Drive-Thru

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In the 1980 movie *The Blues Brothers*, one of the most famous scenes is an over-the-top car chase in which Dan Aykroyd and James Belushi, on the run from hordes of police squad cars, race through the streets of Chicago and smack dab into the middle of a bustling mall. The shuttered Dixie Square Mall in Harvey, Ill., served as the setting for the scene, in which the Blues Brothers' car plowed into the entrance — shattering the glass doors — and then fueled pandemonium among shoppers and retailers as it careened through the mall's concourse.

More than 25 years later, that image has now been replayed — possibly in a mall near you. In three different incidents in the past 12 months, drivers plowed through mall entrances and damaged properties. Two General Growth Properties centers — Altamonte Mall and Augusta Mall — and one Westfield Group property, Sunrise Mall, were the sites of the drive-throughs. Miraculously, no one was killed in any of these incidents. And in only one was a driver seriously injured.

But these episodes have brought to the fore the question of what mall operators can do to better protect properties before the consequences become more severe. Drivers crashing their cars through malls can do enough damage on their own destroying property and inflicting injuries.

But more sinister scenarios exist.

In June, a terrorist attempted to drive an SUV full of explosives into the Glasgow Airport terminal in Scotland. Protective barriers, or bollards, stopped the car and prevented the terrorist from detonating the explosives inside where the terminal was jam-packed with travelers.

Security experts say that incident should be a wake-up call for owners of properties chock full of soft targets. It also underscores how effective bollards can be.

As it stands, there are no industrywide sanctioned directives or standards when it comes to protecting malls from vehicles. But that does not mean there aren't steps that can be taken. In fact, the technology to prevent or minimize the incidents is quite simple.

Mall operators and security consultants point specifically to fixed-steel barriers, known as bollards, as the most effective tool in an arsenal of defensive measures. Such bollards penetrate deep into the ground, secured by concrete. (In the case of light towers, the bollards secure to the structure above as well.)

But some experts say the industry has been slow to adopt this technology at the nation's 1,200 enclosed malls. Instead of bollards, which can cost up to \$10,000 per entrance, many have opted for less expensive planters, whose costs start in the hundreds of dollars.

"Some of them genuinely feel that non-fixed bollards are sufficient," says Scott Born, vice president of corporate relations for Marietta, Ga.-based Valor Security. (Born served as a moderator at the ICSC 2007 Shopping Center Security Conference held this past winter in Baltimore, Md.) Bollards, as opposed to the decorative planters, Born says, would have made it difficult, if not impossible for the vehicles to penetrate the properties where drive-throughs have occurred.

Rob Reiter, national sales manager for Cal Pipe Security Bollards, which sells fixed-steel barriers, is even more blunt, saying that some mall owners are playing a dangerous game. "They are waiting for the next [mall-related] incident," he says, in which someone is severely injured or worse ... killed and they are forced to take preventative action.

The car stops here

One mall that is moving from planters to bollards is the Altamonte Mall located in Altamonte Springs, Fla. Jonathan Hubbell, senior general manager for the property, says fixed-steel barriers "are the next evolution in protecting the building."

Hubbell should know.

The Altamonte Mall is one of the properties that was damaged in a car drive-through incident. In December, jilted teen Solomon Kahin crashed his car through one of the mall's entrances and slammed into a kiosk where a woman he was targeting worked.

During his excursion through the mall, which was closed at the time, he plowed through the mall's food court and traversed an escalator before plummeting through an atrium and crashing. The driver, who was reportedly trying to commit suicide, sustained serious injuries in the crash.

At the mall's entrances were 4-foot by 6-foot planters meant to restrict access to the property. The problem, though, was that the driver was able to push those planters aside before driving into the mall.

In August, General Growth Properties Inc. took action to prevent another incident like that from ever happening again at the 1.1-million-square-foot property. Mall management took delivery of 20 bollards to replace the planters that it had previously positioned at the mall's four major entrances.

At Sunrise Mall, a very similar story played out. Here too a distraught teen, Dwight Thomas, was targeting a girlfriend's workplace. Here, though, the incident took place while the mall was open. The car sped past a department store into the property's central court, mowed over a kiosk and then out another exit. The rampage reportedly caused \$60,000 in damages.

Two months earlier, a man's expedition through Augusta Mall in a sport-utility vehicle was caught on videotape. It captured him crashing through an entrance to the mall and driving through several sections, including the food court, before exiting through another entrance.

General managers at both of those properties declined to comment regarding what preventative measures, if any, they have taken at those properties. According to a Westfield spokesperson, bollards and barriers were already in place (or being installed) at some of the mall entrances at the time of the incident. Since then, Westfield has finished installing bollards at all the mall's entrances. General Growth's corporate office did not respond to calls seeking comment.

Many owners, though, have been proactive in protecting properties. For example, Park Plaza, a 500,000-square-foot mall owned by CBL & Associates in Little Rock, Ark., has had security bollards protecting its entrances for 20 years. Recently, the bollards were updated as part of renovating the property in 2006. "I can't imagine anybody doing a building without them," says Gary Blakney, marketing director for Park Plaza. "It's something all public buildings in this day and age should have."

Another benefit of bollards is that they can serve as a deterrent. If someone is scouting targets, the sight of bollards could send them on to the next property, according to Born. "Anybody who's going to commit an act like this is going to look for an ideal target," He says. "My recommendation is to make it difficult if not impossible."

Every month, Cal Pipe's Reiter says, he gets dozens of e-mails as a result of his customized Web-engine search for vehicles crashing into retail properties ranging from freestanding fast-food and coffee shops and grocery stores, to strip shopping centers and malls. Vehicles careening through malls may get national headlines, but cars smash through storefronts all the time.

In the U.S. he estimates at least one fatality occurs every week from these kinds of incidents. For example, on August 7 a 69-year-old man was struck and killed when a car jumped the curb and hit him as it crashed into a storefront on Long Island, New York. "It's mind-boggling how often it happens and how simple it is to correct," Reiter says.

Downey, Calif.-based Cal Pipe has produced bollards for buildings ranging from foreign embassies and U.S. government offices to industrial buildings and malls. According to Reiter, 25 percent of the firm's revenues are generated from malls and it counts four of the largest mall operators in the United States among its clients.

The cost associated with installing the steel barriers can vary significantly depending upon whether they are utilitarian or decorative and the amount of impact to be withstood. Reiter says Cal Pipe produces bollards that can stop a 15,000-pound dump truck traveling at 50 miles per hour.

"Every mall in America could defend its entrances for a couple thousand to ten thousand dollars per entrance," says Reiter.

According to Born, the premiums for bollards are minimal at a new mall or one undergoing a redesign. If a mall is in the design, phase the added costs are even less.

Detour ahead

In addition to strategically placing bollards at the main entrances of a mall, owners could further protect properties by integrating the industry-recognized concept known as Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design. CPTED calls for designing vehicular traffic to flow in a circular or winding pattern in their approach to the mall entrances.

This design could also be augmented with speed bumps that would further restrict vehicles from gaining enough speed in order to penetrate a mall entrance. Vehicular traffic designs that permit straight-line access to the mall entrance from a main roadway allow a driver opportunity to gain enough momentum to displace planters.

The 2006 renovation at Park Plaza also encompassed reconfiguring its parking lots' design and street traffic flow to work in conjunction with the bollards that help prohibit an unauthorized vehicle from gaining entry to the mall.

"Not only do they add aesthetics they also provide a measure of security," Blakney says.

ICSC declined to comment as to what, if any, preventative measures mall operators could employ at their properties to minimize the likelihood of their property being vulnerable to a drive-through. Instead, they suggested Retail Traffic contact development consulting firms.

Ka architecture, the Cleveland, Ohio-based design firm, is incorporating bollards into the landscape plazas at some of its mall projects. The Americans with Disabilities Act compliant systems provide the security required at a property where a zero-curb is mandated, according to David Bader, director of landscape architecture and executive vice president at ka architecture.

"We do them with an emphasis on aesthetics," says Bader, "we don't want the mall viewed as a fortress."

He adds, a lot of malls are removing the landscaping, foliage and planters that comprise the physical barrier around a mall's perimeter, to enhance the shoppers' sense of security by eliminating blind spots. Since the incident at Altamonte Mall in December, Bader says, ka architecture has received a growing number of inquiries from mall operators exploring bollard placement at its mall and department store entrances.

Reiter estimates it would take approximately 15 years to install bollards at all the shopping centers in the United States. Over the past several months, Cal Pipe has realized an increase in business, Reiter says, but, not from malls.

As effective as they may be, bollards aren't enough to eliminate all the security threats posed at malls.

In February, a teenage gunman killed five people in a shooting spree at Trolley Square in Salt Lake City before police shot and killed him. Armed with a shotgun, bandoleer of shotgun shells and backpack full of ammunition, the teen walked through the 239,000-square-foot mall owned and managed by real estate investment firm ScanlanKemperBard (SKB) Companies.

ScanlanKemperBard chairman, CEO and principal, Robert D. Scanlan doesn't know what measures could be instituted at the mall to prevent a tragic event like that from happening again. Instead, he said, the focus at Trolley Square has been on restoring business at the mall.

"We think that event was so random and so bizarre that no steps have been taken frankly to try and prevent that," says Scanlan. "We don't know how you can prevent a madman from walking into your shopping center with a rifle."

Rubbernecking

While you would expect there to be a decline in mall traffic in the wake of such events, operators at Sunrise, Altamonte and Trolley Square cited they were intensely focused on restoring the shopping centers to full operation, to minimize any business interruptions they did not experience any drop-off in patronage.

Scanlon reports that Trolley Square has not realized any slump in traffic as a result of the February tragedy.

"We were so focused on how to get back in business in the best possible manner so as not to offend the victims families and the shopkeepers," Scanlon says.

At Westfield a corporate spokeswoman says Sunrise Mall remained open for business while the shattered glass that resulted from the drive-through was replaced and other damage in the mall was repaired.

And, everything was up and running shortly after the incident at General Growth's Altamonte Mall. But, there something interesting resulted from the drive-through. In the days immediately following the incident, mall management observed a sharp spike in shopper traffic.

"There was no drop-off whatsoever," says Hubbell. "Initially there was even an increase." And with foot traffic up at Altamonte afterwards, the vacancy rate fell. According to Hubbell, there has also been a recent increase in interest from retailers to sign leases. "Our occupancy has gone up 4 percent since the event," he says.

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