

Robbery in SugarHouse lot defeated tight security - Philadelphia Inquirer

Written by Administrator

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With 24-hour security patrols inside and out, a state police outpost, regular checks from city officers, and more than 500 surveillance cameras, SugarHouse Casino might be one of the most thoroughly policed areas in the city.

And when three women were robbed by two men at gunpoint early Friday in the parking lot on their way into the casino, SugarHouse officials said, a security vehicle was patrolling nearby.

The robbery, the first reported at SugarHouse's 45,000-square-foot property on the Delaware River since it opened in September, according to police, happened quickly - possibly in less than a minute, said Anthony DiLacqua, the casino's head of security. By the time security officials arrived, the robbers had fled in a silver Pontiac. Though the robbery was captured on video, no arrests had been made. "This was a horrible thing to happen, and we're very upset," said DiLacqua, a former chief inspector with city police. "Our goal is to provide the safest environment possible for our guests, much like that's the goal of the Philadelphia Police Department in the city."

The SugarHouse security team is considering how safety at the casino can be improved, DiLacqua said. But the patrons at SugarHouse - the casino drew more than 200,000 in its first month - are already being monitored by many eyes.

DiLacqua would not say how many security officers worked at the casino, but he said that in addition to that force and the state police, officers from Fishtown's 26th Police District often stopped by on patrol. Gaming officials and state police troopers patrol the casino floor on occasion, and at least one security vehicle circles the parking lot at all hours. The 500-plus surveillance cameras inside and outside the casino are pointed at almost every inch of the property, he said. "We think the footprint here is fairly well covered," DiLacqua said. "But there's been crime in Philadelphia before SugarHouse was built, and there's been crime on Delaware Avenue before SugarHouse was built."

Before Friday's robbery, police had received three reports of crime at SugarHouse since the casino's Sept. 23 opening: two reports of theft from cars in the parking lot, and one of a broken car window.

About 1 a.m. Friday, the three women, ages 29, 30, and 32, arrived in the parking lot and were approached by two men who demanded money. One of the women was pistol-whipped, and the men took \$340 and credit cards.

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Last month, a 26-year-old man who had won about \$2,000 at SugarHouse was pistol-whipped near his Cinnaminson home after leaving the casino. Police say they believe he was followed by two men who overheard him discussing his winnings and then tried to rob him. The assailants got nothing; the man wrestled one to the ground, and another tripped over his baggy pants, police said. Heated debate greeted SugarHouse's opening on the river in Fishtown.

Supporters have said Philadelphia's first legal gambling establishment will bring jobs and cash to the area and increase business at nearby restaurants such as Darling's Diner, which recently expanded to 24-hour service to accommodate the casino crowd.

Community groups have argued that the casino will bring traffic and crime to the area, and they have expressed doubt that the casino's economic benefits will outweigh the negatives.

SugarHouse emerged from the debate with the stated goal of being a good neighbor. The casino has since donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Penn Treaty Special Services District, a group created to distribute casino money to local organizations. SugarHouse's scheduled expansion in 2012 will mean \$1 million annually to the group, casino officials have said.

Part of SugarHouse's commitment to positive neighbor relations, DiLacqua has said, is ensuring that the casino does not become a drain on the city's already strained police force. That means keeping crime down at the casino via SugarHouse's own security.

The local organization Casino-Free Philadelphia has volunteered additional manpower by organizing several town watch patrols in the area, including one set for Saturday.

Tom Hajdo, a spokesman for the group, said Friday's robbery was the type of crime the organization had feared the casino would bring. The majority of SugarHouse's cameras are there to catch cheating and employee theft. "Casinos create opportunities for crime," he said. "As long as it's here, we're going to keep seeing these types of problems."

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