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Preparation they can bank on

FBI offers advice on staving off theft attempts

"We're competitors when it comes to the bucks. We're partners when it comes to our customers' safety," said Roger Pida, vice president of corporate security for Wells Fargo.

Pida and more than a dozen banking executives met with Santa Clarita Valley Sheriff's Deputies and FBI agents during a bank-theft prevention training seminar Wednesday. The seminar was hosted by the Santa Clarita Business Alliance and the city of Santa Clarita.

FBI Special Agent Stephen May came armed with statistics on bank robberies and techniques for stopping bank robbers.

"During the '90s Southern California earned the title 'bank robbery capital of the world,'" he said. There were more than 2,600 bank robberies in 1992 compared with 340 in 2007.

"In 1992 there was one bank robbery every 60 minutes of every working day," Pida said.

May can't explain the spike in bank crimes in the early 1990s.

"Was it the economy? We don't know," he said. "When we interview bank robbers it's common to hear them say they saw a movie where a guy gets away with a large sum of money."

California's large population also factors in. The state leads all states in annual bank robberies, and Los Angeles, Ventura, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, Santa Barbara and San Louis Obispo counties account for 6 to 8 percent of all bank robberies nationwide, May said.

On the surface that looks bad. However, those counties have a population of more than 18 million people. "That is more than all but two other states in the country," he said.

May separated bank robbery fact from fiction during the session.

"People think a certain group robs banks, but bank robbers come from all demographics," he said. They also hit banks in all types of areas.

"The idea that banks near highways are more desirable targets is not true," he said. "Bank robbers hit banks they feel comfortable with."

Banks and law enforcement officers have tools to fight criminals. May recommends a digital camera capable of e-mailing the picture.

He is also a fan of bandit barriers including: bullet-resistant Plexiglas that extends from the counter top to the ceiling.

"It keeps bank robbers from hopping the counter and taking over the bank," May said.

High-tech and low-tech devices can deter bank robbers, but the biggest tool against bank crimes are the tellers, Pida said.

"The best weapons are a set of eyes. A good eyewitness is priceless," he said.

The witness information isn't just for law enforcement. The Southern California Bank Security Group circulates information on bank robberies and hosts quarterly meetings with its member banks and the FBI, Pida said. Membership is free.

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