

MIDDLETOWN

Local mall site of terrorist attack drill

Emergency responders practiced for an attack on the Oxford Valley Mall.

By **BEN FINLEY STAFF WRITER**

If terrorists ever want to attack Bucks County, Middletown would likely be their bull's-eye. The township is loaded with the most potential "soft targets." Those are non-government and military places like shopping malls, hospitals and schools. In fact, the town of about 45,000 people hosts 24 of the 25 kinds of soft target categories defined by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, according to Middletown police officer Jim Waltz. So what are they? Well, that answer is on a need-to-know basis, Waltz said. But even those without top-secret clearance know the Oxford Valley Mall is one very big soft target. On Wednesday, emergency responders from Middletown and surrounding municipalities practiced for a potential terrorist attack on the mall. The drill had minimal impact on shoppers. The responders acted out the following scenario: Police learn that a domestic terrorism group that hates corporate America wants to bomb the shopping center. Emergency responders place concrete barriers around the mall, set up checkpoints and screen vehicles coming into the parking lot, eventually catching the terrorists.

(In actuality, there were no concrete barriers and officers searched the cars of volunteers.)

The goal of the drill was to sharpen participants' skills, particularly in communication and logistics, in preventing anything close to what they dreamed up on Wednesday, Waltz said.

The actual plot is farfetched, according to Malachy Kavanagh, a spokesman for the International Council of Shopping Centers. He said he's not aware of any successful bombings on American malls.

Instead, the kind of violence that has occurred in America's shopping malls, although seldom, is the shooting of bystanders, like last year, when a gunman killed eight people and then himself in a mall in Omaha, Neb. But Middletown trained for that kind of shooting last year at Neshaminy High School, Waltz said, adding that the police wanted to train for a different scenario this time around.

Even though shopping mall terrorism involving bombs hasn't happened in America, preparation for it has abounded, Kavanagh said.

"Since 9/11, every place has to consider itself a potential terrorist target," he said.

Malls across the country have considerably beefed up their emergency plans since 9/11, making Wednesday's exercise commonplace. The shopping center council has held scores of anti-terrorism classes across the country. Some mall security directors have received training from the FBI.

The federal government requires Middletown to plan and drill every year for protecting the Oxford Valley Mall and other soft targets, Waltz said.

Most security enhancements in malls have been behind the scenes, with little effect on the relaxed American shopping experience. And malls will likely keep their security that way because Americans simply don't want their bags searched, Kavanagh said.

That worries Harvey Kushner, a professor at the Department of Criminal Justice at Long Island University.

"Shopping malls have been dodging the bullet for many, many years," he said. "Malls are vulnerable. Will they be a target? Eventually."

Kushner said malls are a no-brainer for terrorists who want to hit symbols of commerce that are brimming with a huge cross section of the population. He said American malls are pervious to just about anybody — including suicide bombers — with the buildings' many access points and lack of metal detectors and well-paid security.

He said American malls should mimic those in Israel, where metal detectors are numerous and security details search bags and vehicles.

But Kushner admits that's pretty much a fantasy here. These days, terrorism fears have been eclipsed by the economy. When someone walks into a mall, they're not thinking about bombs —

they're thinking about their wallet, he said.

But if such an attack happens at Oxford Valley Mall, Middletown is more prepared, Waltz said.

"Everything worked the way it was supposed to," he said when Wednesday's exercise concluded.



State Trooper Maurice Jones checks the undercarriage of a car stopped at the Oxford Valley Mall Wednesday as part of a mock terror drill, while Middletown Officers Mark McCloud and Mike Russo talk to the driver. ART GENTILE / **COURIER TIMES**