

'War room' to consolidate emergency services, terrorism watch

City plans new heart for safety

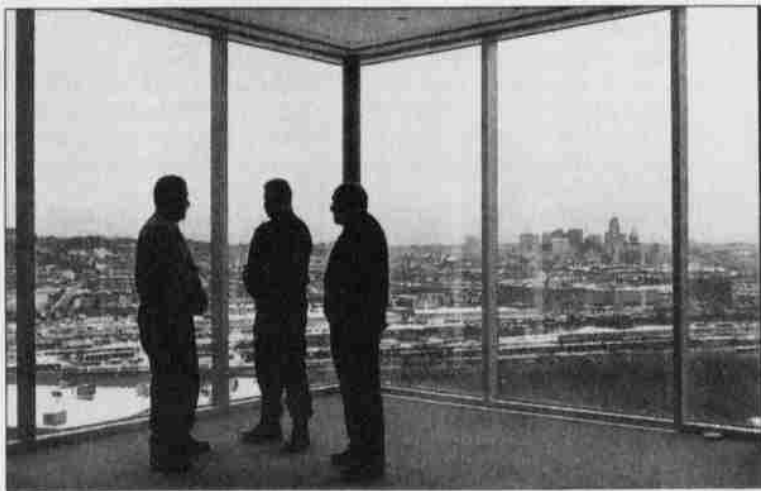
By Matt Leingang

The Cincinnati Enquirer

PRICE HILL - A computerized command center that will bring Cincinnati's fire, police and public health officials together with 911 operations is taking shape high atop Knob Hill on the city's west side.

The 40,000-square-foot building - former headquarters of Slush Puppie Corp. - is mostly empty now, but plans call for it to be converted into an emergency operations center by the end of the year.

From this point, accessible only by a steep, twisting, two-lane road, decisions



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Cincinnati Fire Department District Chief Ed Dadosky (from left), Cincinnati Police Department Lt. Doug Ventre and Health Commissioner Dr. Malcolm Adcock stand in the new regional emergency operations center building.

will be made in the face of terrorist attack or other emergencies.

The project could be Cincinnati's most high-profile use of federal homeland security money that is filtering down to U.S. cities. About \$500,000 will

be spent to build a sleek, mission-control-like operating pit with giant video screens and rows of computer stations where analysts will work year-round.

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It brings city police, fire and public health officials together under one roof and will house a new "terrorist early warning" group. The band of law enforcement officials will assess local terror threats and study ways to beef up security at potential targets, such as high-rise buildings.

Although the operations center will serve as a "war room" for all terror threats - biological, chemical, radiological and nuclear - it can be pressed into action for any kind of emergency, from a chemical spill on Interstate 75 to an outbreak of public health threats such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome.

The new command center is a city project, but officials hope to make it a regional resource. Emergency responders from surrounding counties in Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana - and representatives from the FBI, the Coast Guard, the Ohio State Highway Patrol and the Ohio Department of Health - are being invited to place offices there.

"Something like a large-scale biological incident is going to impact the entire region, and we need a regional, coordinated response," said Cincinnati Public Health Commissioner Malcolm Adcock.

The Knob Hill facility will be in sharp contrast to the city's current emergency operations center in a classroom at the Cincinnati Water Works building, 4747 Spring Grove Ave. It's a dormant facility. A few TVs, telephones, computers and a map are kept in a closet and pulled out in times of crisis. There is no permanent staffing.

Federal money from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security is helping to build emergency operations centers in other American cities. Larger cities, such as New York City and Washington, already have them, and Cleveland is setting up shop in a five-story building downtown.

Staying prepared

Events such as this month's discovery of the deadly poison ricin in a U.S. Senate office building are ongoing reminders of the need to be prepared, said Ed Dadosky, the district fire chief in Cincinnati who heads the department's weapons-of-mass-destruction response planning unit.

"It used to be that cities would build an emergency management center and activate it only in



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the case of a natural disaster like a tornado or a flood," said Michael Snowden, Hamilton County's homeland security project manager and retired Cincinnati police chief. "But now we're being called upon to do a lot more, and we need a facility that operates on a daily basis."

Snowden moved to the Knob Hill command center last month.

The city of Cincinnati purchased the Slush Puppie building in November for about \$2.5 million. The city's 911 center is also relocating there, leaving its headquarters on Ezzard Charles Drive.

The building is just 5 years old, but Slush Puppie vacated it in 2000 after owner and founder Will Radcliff sold the business to Dr Pepper/Seven Up Inc. It also briefly served a Cincinnati charter school.

The hill has an elevation of 750 feet, helping to make the site secure - there's only one road up the steep hill, which police can easily seal off during emergencies.

Plus, the site is strategically located. Computer models show that the hill is upwind of potential sources of toxic releases, such as an accident or explosion that might release chemicals in the CSX railyard.

The heart of the emergency center will be the theater-style command hub.

From their work stations, officials will be able to view wall-mounted video screens that monitor newscasts. Maps will be projected to pinpoint geographic hotspots. Satellite links will allow officials to communicate with responders in the field, and an extensive videoconferencing system will enable them to gather data from state and national experts, including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta - which opened a high-tech operations center of its own last year.