

Our doomsday center: just in case

On a hilltop west of Interstate 75, with panoramic views of rail yards and the backside of Union Terminal like an upside-down mixing bowl, is a former warehouse for Slush Puppies - now home of Cincinnati's new watchdog. You'd never know it from the Slush Puppie tracks on the ceiling, but

Knob Hill is the new nerve center for regional homeland security.

Or, to put it another way: This is Cincinnati's "CTU" if we ever get a starring role on "24." And unlike the parking ramp on the hit TV show, our operations center will look like a White House war room would look if Donald Trump were president (a scary thought).

Cincinnati doesn't have nuclear meltdowns. We don't need to hunt down terrorist "moles." The closest thing we have to a secret agent is someone moonlighting in real estate.

But any city can be a target of ter-



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rorism. And maybe the next time we get another five-alarm barrel fire, our high-tech gadgets will be a lot more impressive than the props on TV. Instead of crowding around a computer monitor, special agents from the FBI, EPA, NIOSH, CFD, DEA, ATF, CPD, CIA and IRS will be able to watch local

Jack Bauers save the world on the biggest flat-screen TV in town: 36 feet wide and 10 feet tall.

There will be room to bring all the emergency firefighters, cops and security officials in Southwest Ohio together. Overlooking the room like a press box is a new Cincinnati dispatching center, where 911 operators will move in soon.

It's like moving from Mayberry to Manhattan.

"A year from now, we hope to flip the switches," said Mike Snowden, the former Cincinnati police chief, now Hamilton County homeland security director. "What we have

now is basically a conference room at waterworks, where we keep all the equipment in a closet."

When something happens - a presidential visit, fire or other public safety emergency - they drag the stuff out and start plugging in phones, computers and radios. "It takes an hour," Snowden said.

The new Regional Operations Center will be humming and ready, 24/7.

"We're focusing on the homeland security responsibilities," Snowden said, "but that will help us with any event. The same technology we use for homeland security can also be used to reduce crime."

The center is not much to look at now - unpainted drywall and joint compound, power tools and loose wiring litter the floors. But the finished offices are already home to SWAT command and Fire Department officials who are teaming up with Snowden.

"In my 35 years here I have never seen cooperation like we're see-

ing here between the county and the city," he says, leading a tour.

And that took some serious cattle-prodding by the feds, he said. "They put a gun to the city's and county's heads and said, 'You figure out how it's going to be spent together, or you're not going to spend it.'"

Altogether, the city, county and federal project will cost about \$6 million, including \$1.5 million in Homeland Security grants for the operations center, Snowden said.

"It's regional, not just for Hamilton County or the city," he said. If something happens in any of the surrounding counties, local emergency teams can turn to the Regional Operations Center for help.

If Jack Bauer had a place like this, he could shorten his show to "8," with an hour for lunch.

It's good to know it's there if we need it - but let's hope we never do.

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